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NIGHTINGALE NAT; or, THE FOREST CAPTAINS. BY T. C. HARBAUGH.



"I AM SHADOW-SHOT, AND I MEAN BUSINESS."

Nightingale Nat;

OR,

THE FOREST CAPTAINS.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,

AUTHOR OF "NICK O' THE NIGHT," "THE
HIDDEN LODGE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

SINGING THE TRAIN INTO DANGER.

"I love to sing till the wild woods ring!

O! ho! O! ho!

Till the leaves are stirred, and every bird

Dreams of the wondrous song he's heard!

O! ho! ho! ho!"

It was the clear barytone voice of a boy singing in the dark forest that bordered one of the wild rivers whose waters, after many miles of tortuous traveling, lose themselves in the immensity of Lake Superior.

He made the woods ring with his musical notes, and it may easily be believed that many a sleeping bird was constrained to lift a drowsy head from beneath a good warm wing, and listen to the song of their new rival.

The singer was seated astride of an ox which, with his yoke-fellow, was slowly drawing a clumsy wagon over a horrible road, if we may be permitted to designate the forest trail by that name, in this day of pikes and macadamized thoroughfares.

The sun had departed for the day, and the woods were enjoying the short twilight which rendered the objects quite indistinct among the ghostly trees.

The youth evidently had charge of the team, for his ruddy hands held a heavy driver's whip which he did not use, for he had transferred himself to Buck's back. His "whoa-haws!" like his wild song, were full of nature's music. He was a natural singer.

Clad in a light-green jacket which boasted of a shoulder cape of a darker shade of the same color, and close-fitting gray pantaloons which were tied around the ankles, and just above rather fantastic moccasins, the boy presented a real woodland appearance. He wore no covering on the head. Indeed, he needed none, so far as the question of warmth was concerned, for his hair was very abundant, and though inclined to curl fell gracefully upon the emerald cape above mentioned.

He could, besides his wealth of hair which was very dark, boast of a full ruddy face indicative of a healthful constitution, and a pair of sparkling eyes that were full of good humor. Such a boy would never die of the blues.

A noise before him told that one or more wagons were in advance, pushing northward, while the occasional crack of a whip behind announced the presence of others.

The voices ahead were those of rough, irritated men, and at times the ruggedness of the road made the air quiver with the curses that fell from their lips. At these times, and they were not infrequent, the oxen came in for a

good beating by the hickory handles of the whips.

In the midst of these difficulties the young Nightingale continued to fill the forest with the echoes of his wonderful voice, and the hand of some unseen spirit, pleased with his humor, seemed to guide his wheels. For they struck few ruts, and the hoofs of the patient oxen did not descend into the unseen holes, which were continually besetting the beasts attached to the foremost wagons.

Verily the Nightingale was the *protege* of some good genius.

"Here! the cap'n says we've had enough of this screechin'!" suddenly cried a rough voice at the boy's side, and he felt himself almost jerked from his perch.

The refrain at that time falling from his lips was ruthlessly snapped in twain.

"Well, if the captain says so, I a'n willing to stop," meekly answered the singing boy, looking down upon the burly fellow who had delivered the "cap'n's" command. "But I do not see why a fellow shouldn't be allowed to exercise his lungs in these parts. Was I singing louder than the men are swearing where the captain is?"

The boy's eyes snapped with the spirit of independence.

"The cap'n didn't send me back hyar to answer a passel of tomfool questions. He wants you to stop singin', an'"—the man's hand fell like a trip-hammer on the gray breeches—"an' if you don't stop, I'm to make you."

"Who said I was not going to stop?" asked the Nightingale, the merry twinkle returning to his eyes. "The captain shall not hear me again to-night. I always try to obey him, and if I do transcend his orders, it is because I forget them in my eagerness to sing. Now don't you think this is true, Zimri?"

"P'raps," the man said tartly and with a scowl. "You sing eternally too much. If we git into an Injun muss, I'd like to know what you'd amount to."

"Try me!" was the quick reply.

"I 'spect we'll hev thet chance afore long. It's a long way yet to the mining country. Our oxen may be shot full of arrows ag'in' to-morrow night, an' we—sculped, p'raps."

The man looked up with triumph, as if he had expected to frighten the boy; but his countenance fell into the slough of chagrin when he did not discover a sign of fear on the youthful face. It retained its ruddy color.

"I'm goin' back to the cap'n now," he said, resolving to hide his failure by a hasty retreat. "Now mind you, little Nat, no more screechin' to night. The cap'n ain't in the best of humors nohow. It's him what's doin' most of the swear-in' ahead."

With this the man left the boy and passing beyond the horns of the oxen, was soon lost among the shadows that concealed the foremost wagons.

"Captain Lige hasn't been very happy these six days past," the musical prodigy muttered. "He is afraid that he will not get all the gold that they say is to be found along the shore of the big lake. Sometimes I think that something besides the love for gold brought him into

these woods, for didn't the people tell us before we struck these woods that the ore was copper and not gold? But Captain Lige said that they lied, and here we are, creeping north toward Lake Superior. Maybe I did wrong in coming along; but I guess I couldn't well help myself. I'm in for it now at any rate, and I'll face the music as it comes."

A moment's silence followed the boy's low words, and then, unable to repress the music which like a well-spring flowed from his heart, he began to drum with the whip on the horns of the plodding ox.

"When a fellow can't sing he can think the songs over!" he said to himself, with a smile. "Bless me! if I wouldn't like to give a concert in these woods! But just wait till I get to the lake! Blossoms and flowers! but I'll make the old shores ring. The captain will have to gag me if he wants me still there!"

The lake-shore! Nightingale Nat did not think, in the midst of his castle-building, that he might never see the pictured rocks of Superior.

All at once the drumming ceased, for the curses of the men ahead failed to salute the boy bird's ears, and instead, there rung in them a strange, rough voice which he knew he had never before heard.

It seemed to denote danger to the train.

"Get ready to fight!" cried a man who passed Nat at a quick pace, and ghost-like vanished toward the rear of the column.

"That we will!" said the boy as he tossed the whip forward upon the yoke, and slid quickly from the beast. "Wasps and crickets! I didn't look for a brush so soon, but it seems that we're in for it. Well, we'll give the reds the best we've got in the train."

As he uttered the words he hastened to the wagon and drew forth a rifle. Then he slung pouch and powder-horn over his head, and took his station at the heads of the oxen, which, at his command, had come to a halt.

"They'll be down upon us in a minute!" he heard the voice of the man who had passed him say. "The woods to the right ar' full of 'em. The cap'n says 'fight,' but this is a pretty place to corral the wagons, I'm thinkin'."

The man was coming back.

"Who brought the news, Jack?" asked the boy as the trainman came in sight. "I heard a strange voice down where the captain is."

"An' a strange critter is the man what owns it," was the reply. "'Pon my word, Nat, you never see'd such a feller. We'll hev to wait till daylight to see whether he's a white man. Oh, we're in fur it. He says that they're not fur off an'—I didn't stay to hear all his gab. Cuss the day we sot out fur the lake! Why, thar's no more gold thar than thar's in my eye."

"That is what I think, Jack. But we mustn't whimper over spilled milk, not even when the pitcher is broken."

"Of course not; but the cap'n—"

The man did not get to finish his sentence for Zimri Paddock made his appearance on the scene, and caught the boy rudely by the arm.

"The cap'n wants to see you!" he said in a 'one that boded the youth no good. "It wasn't hard to tell that your infarnal screechin' would

git us into trouble. Why couldn't you keep yer tongue to yerself? The snake wouldn't know whar the cat-bird's nest is if it wasn't fur her squealin'."

Before the boy could reply, he found himself jerked forward by the brutal man, who in a few words told Jack to guard the team until relieved by orders.

At an inconsiderate pace Nightingale Nat was hurried toward the head of the train, from which came the voices of the men in conversation.

He knew that the captain was in a passion, for sundry expressions, more emphatic than elegant, told him this, and he expected to encounter a simoom of rage where that worthy stood.

"Here's the blatant brat!" cried a strongly-built and dark-featured man as he sprung upon the youth who was released by Paddock, when he saw that he had attracted the attention of the group. "Time and again I have told him to bridle his tongue; but he would sing. Here he is, sir. Come forward and look at the bird."

The captain's last words were addressed to a gaunt specimen of humanity whose shaggy head looked in the dim light like a lion's, perched, and out of place, upon the shoulders on a man.

The quaint personage took a long stride forward, and from beneath a tangled mass of long eyebrows fastened his gaze upon the boy.

"Why he's a leetle one!" he said in a rough, uncultivated, but not unkind voice. "Is this the bird what I heard so far from the wagons?"

"Yes!" grated Captain Rough—a name which he wore with credit to his nature. "This is the bird. Wait! I'll shake his plumage up a little."

Hard upon the last rough words, Nightingale Nat was jerked suddenly from the ground, and shaken so furiously by the captain of the train that his rifle fell from his grasp!

"That's what I call shaking his plumage up a little!" said Rough, as he released the boy and turned with a grin of brutal delight upon the uncouth visitor.

Nat staggered when released. It seemed to him that the captain had loosened every bone in his body.

"He's the scamp what is bringing the outlaws and Indians down upon us with his singing!" Rough continued. "Bless me! if I'm done with him yet. The fiends will not attack us for ten minutes. Paddock, where's a whip?"

The next instant a heavy ox-whip was thrust into the captain's hand, and with an oath he pushed his right sleeve above the elbow.

"Stand still, there!" he cried to the boy who involuntarily shrunk toward the wagons as he caught sight of the cruel whip in the hand of Rough. "Move, if you dare! and by my life! I'll cut your chicken-throat the first blow."

White-faced now, Nightingale Nat halted and looked around.

The faces of the members of the caravan did not exhibit any signs of pity. While few showed evidences of glee at the expected punishment, more than one was partially averted. It was evident that Captain Rough ruled supreme over the train.

"I'll teach him to sing the enemy down upon us!" grated the brute as the heavy lash described a circle around his head. "Yes, my friend—"

There was the sudden darting of a figure forward, and the uncouth invader of the train planted himself firmly like a rock before the threatened boy.

"Don't you hit the leetle one!" he cried, putting forth his long arm while his keen eyes sent sparks of fire from their dark caverns. "I reckon as how no giant hes a right to whip a dwarf. He didn't know thet it war wrong to sing in these parts. Music is in him, an' it hed to come out; thet's all."

Captain Rough dropped the uplifted whip, and, with a face livid with rage, started back. His eyes were riveted upon the interferer in his sport.

"Who are you?" he almost yelled. "And what do you know about the boy?"

"Answerin' your last question first, I say 'nothin'!" was the reply. "I am Old Shadow-Shot, at your sarvice, an' by the snakes of the woods! I'll kill the first man what te'ches the leetle one in my presence. Thet's me, and I mean business!"

Nightingale Nat, with a look of deep gratitude, crept closer to the strange being.

CHAPTER II.

THE VULTURES OF THE WOODS.

"HARK! Can't you fellows stop quarreling for a moment so a person can hear something?"

At the edge of a dense forest, not very far from the scene of the incidents just narrated, a company of men, mostly Indians, were, with two exceptions, seated statue-like on the backs of horses whose hanging heads proclaimed them considerably jaded.

"There it is again!" said the speaker, after a moment of silence. "That is the voice of some one singing. We are going to strike the train to-night."

At the mention of a train the horsemen lifted their heads, and eagerness flashed in their eyes.

"Cap'n, do you think it is whar that chap is singin'?"

It was a dark-faced, uncouth individual who put this question.

"There is just where it is and nowhere else," was the reply.

"Cap'n Rough would not allow it, I was thinkin'. Doesn't he know that he's in a dangerous kentry?"

"He had ought to. But, as he has advanced so far without accident, I suppose he thinks that he will get on to the copper country without trouble."

"Poor fool!" sneered the rough man. "Cap'n, whar's the train what has passed over this trail unteched?"

A curious smile played with the cruel lips of the man called cap'n.

Ay, where was the train which had passed through the Wisconsin forest unscathed, to the wonderful copper mines of Lake Superior?

The Vultures of the woods had fallen upon it when in the midst of fancied security, and left

but ruins of wagons and bones of oxen and men to mark the spot of the fatal swoop!

"You're right, Rafe! where is the one?"

"Its name is nary," was the answer, accompanied by a malicious chuckle that sounded like the chatter of wolfish teeth. "But, Cap'n Dave, you can't hear the song now."

"No, it grew still suddenly, just as if Captain Rough had put his hand over the singer's mouth. The train is just ahead of us now."

"Sartain, cap'n?"

"Certainly, I am."

Then the last speaker turned to the dark figures behind him.

"Get ready!" he said, in a tone of command.

"A rich prize is jogging slowly over the trail, and we'll strike it near the place where we struck Collyer's party."

"Great Caesar! cap'n, I wish you hedn't said a word about that fracas," said the man called Rafe as his hand fell on Captain Dave's arm.

"Pshaw! you'll get out of your ghostly notions before you die, old boy," the brigand said, with a sneer. "I never think of that little brush, and I never trouble myself about the things that frighten you. Let me tell you, Rafe, and I say it in a low tone, for I don't want the rest of the boys to hear."

The bandit lowered his voice as he leaned toward the dark-faced man.

"Well, out with it, cap'n!"

"I am ashamed of you; indeed, I am, Rafe. I don't want to tell you so before the boys. I tell you that nobody escaped from Collyer's train!"

"Nobody, cap'n?" ejaculated the bandit, opening his eyes with incredulity. "What about the gal?"

"Oh, there wasn't a girl in the train!" said the leader, with a forced smile. "Are you going to harp about it all your life? I was there, and when I say there was no girl in the train, why, there wasn't. That settles it."

"Mebbe it does and mebbe it doesn't," blurted the unconvinced Vulture; "mebbe I wasn't there that night, or p'raps I went into the muss with my eyes shut, an' didn't open 'em until it was over."

The captain of the forest scourges bit his lip.

"It is no use!" he said, straightening up in a pet of chagrin. "You're bound to have your own way, and have it and be hanged."

"Not so fast, Cap'n Dave!" and the speaker's eyes shot a malicious gleam at his leader. "I've been your right bower fur five years right in these woods, and when I say thet there was a gal with Collyer's train when we struck it, why there was—that's all!"

There was no reply to this, and the next moment the freebooter's hand gathered up the reins as he turned to the main body of his force:

"Ready!" he said. "Now let us be off. It is a richer prize than Collyer's train was. It must be ours before morning."

There was a quick gathering of reins, and the spot where the outlaws had halted was soon deserted.

The two brigands who were exchanging some high words when the strange forest song reached their captain's ears separated without a

word; but their looks told that they would resume the quarrel at the first opportunity.

It was evident to the man that rode at the head of the party that the train was not far away.

Let us look at him as he appeared in the twilight of that eventful day.

He was a very frontier Apollo. Though in the neighborhood of his thirtieth year, he looked like a man of twenty-three or four. A proud and shapely head sat regally on broad and massive shoulders. The dark eyebrows over-arched a pair of deep, gleaming orbs, which could appear as soft as the eyes of a gazelle, at their possessor's bidding. His hair, black as the lustrous eyes, was closely cropped, and the lips, at once sensual and firm, were more than half-hidden by a heavy yet silken mustache. The body revealed by the close-fitting suit of gray with no ornament save a Mexican-like capote was faultless from chin to boots, and the hand that held the rein seemed fitted for the counting room, and not for the handling of pistol and gun. A wide-brimmed hat set on his head in devil-may-care style completed the bandit's appearance.

His white followers were similarly but not so well clad, and the Indians wore leggings, and, with one or two exceptions, a coarse buckskin jacket or hunting-frock.

This was the band dreaded by adventurers and miners *en route* to the inexhaustible copper mines of Lake Superior. Its terrible forays had been told beyond the Wisconsin woods, and a few trains, knowing its accredited haunts, had skirted the dreary shores of the upper lakes, and, escaping the rifles and tomahawks of the Indians, had reached the mining country in safety. But that route was long, toilsome and exhausting, and many who resolved to try the shorter one and run the risk of being attacked by the bandits, discovered, when it was too late, that the long way was the better one.

None knew anything about the identity of the handsome man, called Captain Dave by his men. Occasionally a sensational journalist, seated in some cosy city sanctum, tried to connect him with the young bank cashier who mysteriously disappeared between two days; or proved conclusively, to himself at least, that the Robin Hood of the Northwest was the young Spanish hidalgo who flashed for awhile in avenue society, and then fled after knifing a rival, to turn bandit and terrorize a romantic land.

If they did not demonstrate their theories to the satisfaction of their readers, they filled several columns, and that was something.

Pushing through the woods with the young outlaw slightly in the rear, the cavalcade moved with much caution. Rifles resting carelessly across the pommels of saddles obtained by some night attack upon a rich train, were grasped by determined hands as ever wielded the deadly weapon.

Captain Dave did not speak to the man who rode at his side and never took his eyes from his face.

"Don't I know that there was a gal in Collyer's train?" chuckled the man, who was Rafe Armstrong, already introduced to the reader.

"Ha! my cap'n, you may say that you settled the matter when you say there warn't; but that doesn't settle it by a long shot! Fire and furies! did I go into the train yelpin' like a devil with my eyes shet? Didn't I see the gal crawl under the wagon what the oxen overturned when they fell over, an' when I went to look for her, arter the fray wasn't she clean gone? These are facts, my Cap'n Dave, which are gospel, an' mebbe, besides thet, Funk an' me didn't see the gal—or sunthin' mighty like a female cree-tur'—runnin' into the bush when we war tryin' old Collyer himself."

The brigand seemed to enjoy his communion with self. It relieved him vastly, and he looked as if he had convinced the forest Apollo in a straight-forward argument.

"Hist!"

Instantly every rein was tightened, and the bandits looked eagerly forward.

The curses of men and the whips cracking over the heads of the plodding oxen were falling distinctly upon their ears.

The position of the train was now closely revealed and the brigands were eager to attack.

"Put on the mufflers!" Captain Dave said in a low tone, and a stout buck-skin sack was quickly thrust over the mouth of each horse.

"Hev they got any horses, cap'n?" ventured Armstrong.

"It is not likely that Captain Rough would embark for the mines without them," was the reply.

With less speed and increased caution, the for st foes crept upon the train.

They heard it come to a sudden halt which caused an expression of anxiety to flit across the brigand's face, and when signs of commotion became apparent, he looked around into the dark features of his men.

"Something's wrong!" he whispered. "We have been betrayed."

"The gal!" said Armstrong, ominously. "Cap'n, she—"

"That will do!" was the interruption, as the speaker's eyes flashed a baleful light upon the venturesome man. "I will not put up with your infernal fears any longer. Rafe Armstrong, you can do one of two things, and that right now. You can leave me forever, or promise to keep your mouth shut in the future."

"Do you mean it, cap'n?"

"I mean nothing else!" was the firm reply. "What are you going to do? Open your mouth and say quickly."

"I've been with you nigh onto five years," said Armstrong. "We've been good friends, Cap'n Dave—"

"No preliminaries!" interrupted the leader of the brigands, out of patience with the man. "We can't stop here and listen to a long rigmarole of nothing. Go! or keep your mouth shut."

"As long as I stay with you, cap'n?"

"So long as that."

"I can't do it! it's impossible. By my beard! I will not keep my mouth shet fur any man!"

With uplifted hand the bandit chief pointed into the depths of the forest, from which they had lately emerged.

"I understand the p'intin', cap'n," Rafe Arm-

strong said, with a vicious twinkling of his deeply-buried eyes. "When a man will promise to keep his mouth shet, when he knows he can't, he oughter to be tied to a horse's tail. Oh, I'm goin', Cap'n Dave. Mebbe you'll wish by an' by thet you'd let old Rafe have a little tongue run. The gal will prove thet I wasn't blind thet night, mind this, Cap'n Dave!"

Steadily that hand pointed to the west, and Rafe Armstrong wheeled his horse.

"Good-by, boys!" he said, as he rode through the group of astonished men. "I won't quit talkin' for any livin' man. This isn't the last you'll see of Rafe Armstrong, I'm thinkin'."

The white bandits, to the number of six or eight, muttered "good-by," and the Indians nodded, but did not speak.

Slowly the deserter disappeared among the shadows, watched with conflicting emotions by the man who had bade him go.

"If it hadn't been for the noise!" he murmured, significantly, "there would be blood on his saddle now," and then he turned to his remaining men:

"Let nobody succor him!" he said, mercilessly. "We are better off without the gabblin'."

The party advanced again. At the leader's side rode an athletic and evil-faced Indian.

"Ride ahead and leave us!" the young bandit said to this red-skin in an undertone. "You know what to do. Follow him with caution, and see that he is as dead as a stone before you come back to me."

A meaning nod from the savage told that the words were understood, and he rode ahead.

The white bandits seemed to divine the move and exchanged looks, but said nothing. They knew that their chief had thrown one of the most cautious and malicious scarlet fiends of the Northwest upon Rafe Armstrong's trail.

Heaven help the deserter if Sharp Knife sought his life.

On, on still went the cavalcade.

It crept upon the train, and strange voices, which seemed at variance, came to their ears.

"They're having a quarrel among themselves!" the leader of the bandits whispered gleefully to his men. "Now, ready!"

The clicking of thirty rifle-locks was heard.

A moment's silence followed the deadly sound, and then a deafening volley was poured upon the train.

"Charge!" shouted Captain Dave. "Down with the copper thieves!"

It was a wild moment, for, like thunderbolts, the Vultures of the woods fell upon the train.

CHAPTER III.

A HAND ON NAT'S THROAT.

THE onslaught of the outlaws upon the train occurred at the moment when Nightingale Nat, having heard Shadow-Shot's determined words, crept closer to him for that protection which they promised.

As might be expected, the volley, though fired almost at random, threw the adventurers into a confusion which seemed from the first destined to prove disastrous to them.

Fortunately no one was hit, but several bullets found a lodgment in the bodies of the faithful

oxen, which, plunging with pain, overturned the wagons, and added to the uproar.

"Down with the copper thieves!" yelled the fiends, who dashed through the dim light upon the train.

The explorers immediately sprung to arms. Nightingale Nat picked up the rifle which the brutal Captain Rough had shaken from his grasp, and sprung instantly to the side of his uncouth protector, whose eyes flashed with the light of forest battle.

"Stan' by me, leetle one!" cried Shadow-Shot, glancing at the boy. "We're in fur it now, an' I'm thinkin' thet thar'll be some toes turned up to the sky afore the stars go down!"

A few shots which emptied several saddles answered the initial volley, and then the greater part of the train-men, seized by a sudden panic, fled ingloriously from the fray. After all, Captain Rough's followers were for the most part, quite unused to 'dance with death,' and almost instinctively fled from it.

Shadow Shot saw the desertion and gritted his teeth.

"The skunks!" he hissed, derisively. "Leetle one, they'll leave us alone presently. No use fightin' the wood cats, an' fur sech a scamp as yer capt'in. But wait! thar's one feller what needs a leaden pill."

The long rifle struck the speaker's shoulder, and the report that followed the action sent a white plunderer headlong from one of the wagons.

It was a death shot.

"Look!" suddenly cried the boy, grasping the ranger's arm and pointing excitedly to the right. "What does that mean? Captain Rough and that outlaw are friends."

"The—old Harry!" ejaculated Shadow-Shot, starting at the picture exhibited to his gaze. "Sech scamps ought to be friends; but, I'll make one of 'em friendless. Yer rifle, boy."

"No! no!" said the boy, withholding the weapon for which the great bronzed hand of the ranger was eagerly reaching. "Don't shoot Captain Rough now. He knows something that he must tell one of these days!"

"Suthin' about you, leetle one? Well, he shall tell!"

The speaker's lips closed firmly behind the last word.

"They're lookin' fur us—them two devils! It ar' lucky, p'raps, thet we've escaped so long!"

Believing that the flight of the train-men had left the train completely in their power, as indeed it had, the Vultures had fallen to plundering. With that insatiate greed which characterizes brutes of their stamp, they were ransacking the wagons, caring for nothing save the few valuables which were thus offered to them.

The shadows and the greed of the outlaws had providentially screened Shadow-Shot and his young *protege* from observation. The shooting of the man on the wagon had not drawn their attention to the slayer. The others no doubt deemed him slain by some lingering miner who had delivered the shot before joining his companions in flight.

Well might the sight to which Nightingale Nat called Shadow-Shot's attention cause that worthy to start.

Captain Rough was shaking hands with Captain Dave the outlaw!

"Birds of a feather!" the ranger said, looking at the twain. "We'll clip their wings afore long, p'raps. Come with me, leetle one!"

The boy was nothing loth.

With Shadow-Shot he would be beyond the reach of Captain Rough's brutality. He would find a protector in the person of the old ranger, and he did not hesitate to follow.

The two plunged into the forest. Side by side they pushed into the darkening depths; the boy holding trustingly to the hard hand of his protector, and keeping pace with his long and rapid strides.

"Hyar we are!" said Shadow-Shot as he came to a sudden halt.

Nat looked wonderingly into his face.

"I want you to stay hyar till I come back," the ranger continued. "The hole is big enough to hold your carkiss, I guess."

What hole? The boy saw before him the dark trunk of a great tree, and closer scrutiny revealed an aperture about four feet from the ground; but it did not look large enough to admit his body.

"It held me once!" the ranger said, noticing the youth's incredulous look. "Hyar! I'll lift you into the place. Plenty of air, boy, and room at the bottom. I'll be back soon. Thar's suthin' I want to find out back yonder at the wagons. Thar's new deviltry afoot in these parts, an' Shadow-Shot will have new enemies from this hour, I'm thinkin'."

Trusting with all the confidence of a person of his few years, Nightingale Nat allowed himself to be lifted bodily from the ground, and soon found himself snugly ensconced in the novel place of concealment.

"No b'ars in these parts," were the last words that the ranger said to the boy, and then the sound of footsteps which rapidly grew indistinct saluted Nat's ears.

Shadow-Shot had departed, and he was alone in the capacious hollow of a tree in the wild woods of Wisconsin.

The situation so novel and startling to the boy, kept his senses on the alert.

His ears clung with tenacity to the footsteps of his new-found friend, and when they died away and were heard no more, he felt the peril of his situation.

What if the ranger should lose his life among the outlaws? Then, indeed, would he be friendless in the forest, and certain to fall into the unfeeling hands of Captain Rough.

The thought made him shudder. It sent a thrill of terror to his heart.

"Shadow-Shot could make the captain tell why he brought me into these woods. If he fails to-night what shall I do?"

A moment's pause, and the hidden boy said firmly:

"What will I do? Why, I'll make him tell myself! That's what I'll do!"

Thirty minutes on leaden wings passed over the head of Nightingale Nat.

The silence that followed Shadow-Shot's departure seemed to be the calm before the storm.

When there came to the tree the sound of a

footstep in the forest, Nat started joyfully, and ejaculated the cognomen of his protector.

The person approached the tree. He came from the direction of the wagons, from the vicinity of which no shouts of conflict now came.

It was certainly Shadow-Shot. To the boy waiting so anxiously for his return, it could be no one else.

With senses on the *qui vive* and eager to learn the result of the ranger's scout, Nightingale Nat stood erect and peered anxiously into the forest.

Pit-a-pat went the feet of the unseen, until the youthful eyes caught sight of a figure moving among the trees.

"Here I am!"

At the sound of the boy's voice the person stopped, and an ejaculation of success saluted Nat's ears. It was so full of devilishness, so different from Shadow-Shot's voice, that he shrunk from the aperture white as ashes.

He had betrayed his presence to a foe!

As he hugged the wall of the tree furthest from the opening, the boy fondly hoped that he had not revealed his exact whereabouts to the man in the forest; but, alas! he builded poorly.

Straight to the tree, as if guided by the boy's own hand, came the treacherous footsteps.

Nightingale Nat held his breath, and kept his eyes fixed upon a star which glittered far beyond the boughs of the tree.

All at once a heavy pall seemed to blot the planet from his sight. The man without was at the opening.

"Oh, I've found you?" he said, throwing a voice full of the fiendishness of outlawry into the tree.

Nightingale Nat did not reply; but his heart seemed to cease throbbing in his breast.

The man without was Zimri Paddock, one of Captain Rough's men, and a person who hated the boy of the train.

It will be recollected that this man delivered Captain Rough's orders which put an end to Nat's song, just before the charge of the forest demons.

"Oh, it's no use to keep your mouth shut!" hoarsely exclaimed the man. "You thought I was that tall old codger what stepped atween your back an' the cap'n's whip awhile ago. Not by a long shot, my young cat-bird. The old hound's gone back to nose around the train, eh? Well, he'll find an empty tree when he gets hyar. Come, my young hopeful."

What! fall into the hands of such a man as Zimri Paddock, whose every instinct was of the most brutish kind—a man who would not hesitate to take human life for gain or revenge?

"You sung us into a pretty mess, didn't you?" said Paddock, coarsely; "we was gettin' along peacefully. Confiscate your bird throat! I'm goin' to slit it, and let all the music out forever!"

That awful threat, accompanied by the tigerish glare of the two eyes that regarded him, made Nightingale Nat resolve not to fall into the villain's hands.

He could not raise his rifle to his shoulder; the hollow in which he was ensconced would not admit of this, but he could thrust the muzzle toward the aperture and fire.

This he did!

A loud cry followed the report, and when the smoke cleared away Nat saw the far-off star again.

Zimri Paddock was gone! and the boy hoped that the bullet had crashed through his brain!

But this triumph was of short duration.

A wild cry, joined to a savage oath, startled the boy, and the hole became dark again.

The next moment he felt himself grasped rudely by the shoulder, from which the hand almost instantly shot to his throat.

"Not dead yet, my Nightingale!" hissed Paddock. "I'm bleedin' like a stuck deer, but I'll finish you afore I go."

The white-faced boy resisted with all his strength, but the hand of a maddened giant was at his throat, and he was dragged from the tree.

"Thought you hed killed Zim Paddock, eh?" laughed the brute. "Oh, my leetle one, as that old chap called you, I'll let the music out o' your heart! I'll cut your plumage, my nightingale!"

The boy had ceased to offer resistance, for the vise-like grip of the scoundrel's hand was fast depriving him of sensibility.

CHAPTER IV.

UNDECEIVED.

WE have seen with what regret Captain Dave permitted Rafe Armstrong to desert the outlaw band, while on its march to attack the train, lumbering slowly through the woods. On any other occasion he would have added another crime to the list already long, for he would have rid himself of the querulous man with the pistol or the knife.

But at the place where desertion took place, neither of those agents of death would do; the former would make a loud report, and a death-cry might follow a blow from the latter.

Therefore, he did the next best thing that suggested itself; he set Sharp Knife, the wily Crow, upon Armstrong's trail, and felt relieved. He had confidence in the scarlet Vulture.

Rafe Armstrong talked too much. He was continually harping about the "attack on Collyer's train," a deed of forest barbarity which took place in the Wisconsin woods five years prior to the date of our present story. The outlaw was superstitious, but brave to a fault; he had never shrunk from danger; but the only failing that characterized him—his talkativeness—irritated the Apollo of the wilderness, and at last, as we have seen, brought about an open rupture.

Well mounted, and armed with rifle, pistol and knife, the dismissed man left the band to continue its march through the somber woods. He resolutely turned his back upon it and rode away.

He did not look back with longing eyes and think of the spoil which would fall to his comrades by the capture of the train. He did not see the dark-skinned assassin, who, having slid from a horse and hidden a bridle for future use, was following him with eyes that glittered with the wickedness of the basilisk's. If he had dreamed that Sharp Knife was on his track, would he not have turned and put an end to one Indian's trailing?

But Armstrong did not see the murderer.

"Bless me if I don't go and tell her what I

know," he muttered to himself, as he rode along. "She's got no business in these parts, an' if thar's any money in gettin' her back to the city, why I'll run the risk. I wonder how city life would go ag'in, with plenty of money in my pocket, an' good drinks?"

The forest path which the bandit traversed at length brought him to what appeared to be the edge of a cliff, below which sounded the musical hum of flowing water.

"She oughter be at the camp," he said, bringing his steed to a halt. "No harm done if I go down an' see."

Turning to the north he rode slowly along the edge of the precipice for some distance until he stood almost on a level with the stream.

As yet Sharp Knife had not reached his victim, who had put six miles between him and the outlaw band.

Advancing at a snail's pace up the river-bank, strewn in many places with broken rocks, which seriously impeded his progress, Rafe Armstrong pushed along. At last he abandoned his horse and proceeded on foot, with that scarlet trailer still on his track.

All at once the bandit stopped, for he stood on the threshold of a little cave wonderfully chiseled from the rock by the hand of nature. There were evidences of late occupancy, but now it was tenantless.

Armstrong stared at the place and then looked around.

"Gone!" he ejaculated, in a tone of deep disappointment. "I've had all this trip fur nothin'. But she's been hyar. Cap'n Dave needn't tell me thet a gal did not escape from Collyer's train. What I see with my own eyes I know, an' thet was one of the things what I see'd. Business is business! I came hyar to see the gal, an' by bokey! I'm not goin' away till I've set eyes on the creetur'."

With the last words on his lips the deserter stepped into the cave and began to examine the few articles of use which were arranged with that neatness which proclaimed the work of female taste.

Just beyond the threshold and in the darker shadows, for the starlight, beautiful and bright, now seemed to concentrate in the cavern, a pair of sparkling eyes were watching his every movement, and a hand held the long flashing blade of a knife.

Sharp Knife, the trailer.

With that snake-like caution of the red-man, the Pottawatomie lay on his breast, and now and then crept forward without the least sign of noise. Slowly, but with that certainty so suggestive of doom, he approached his victim.

"A right-down pretty place to live," Rafe Armstrong said, admiring the interior of the secluded home. "Here is whar the cap'n comes so much. Now I'd like to see the gal. It's been five years since we cleaned Collyer out, and she warn't more nor ten year old then."

Hard upon the outlaw's last sentence came an exclamation that caused him to start.

"Thet war somebody!" he cried, turning quickly. "I heard a voice, an'—the gal, by gemminy!"

He started forward with the ejaculation on his lips, for standing at the edge of the cave ap-

peared a vision of female loveliness, which might well have surprised the man.

A girl of near sixteen, clad in a half-boyish hunting-suit, with a jaunty cap of skins set upon her head, and a mass of long hair on her shoulders.

The outlaw took in her habiliments and beauty at a glance, and a moment later, he stood before her, his rough hand encircling her arm, and his gaze riveted upon her face.

"I've caught you, my beauty!" he cried, triumphantly. "Didn't you think I war Cap'n Dave? I used to sarve under him, but we played quits to-night. I talked too much, gal—entirely too much for Cap'n Dave. I said that a gal of your looks did escape from Collyer's train, an' he said that if I would still talk such nonsense, I might pack my kit an' dust. You see he says nobody got away; you stan' here to prove that I war right, an' he war wrong. Bless me! I'm glad I found you. Why, you be grown a good deal since that night. Haven't furgot it, have ye, my little bird?"

The man rattled his sentences off too rapidly for the girl, eager as she was to talk, to get in a single word, until he paused for want of breath.

He stood with his back to the foe, crouching near with the knife; but the Indian's eyes were full of curiosity. He, too, had been surprised by the appearance of the girl; and, for the moment, had forgotten the mission upon which his chief had dispatched him.

"What do you mean, sir?" cried the girl quickly upon Armstrong's last word.

"You hev'n't furgotten, I hope," he said, astonished. "Why, warn't you on a train once when a passel of Injuns and whites came down upon it an' killed everybody?"

"Oh!" cried the girl starting from the outlaw, and with a wild shriek she threw her hands to her head, and staggered against the walls of the cavern.

"Now you've got the thinkin'-cap on!" Rafe said. "I didn't think you could furgot that time. It sticks with me, fur I saw you crawl from the wagon, an' run off!"

"Forget that night? never!" was the cry, and the fair speaker, with a pair of eyes flashing above her pallid cheeks, sprung erect, and halted before the outlaw.

"That's what I thought!" was the rejoinder. "I war thar—"

"You! And do you come hither to tell me that you were among the forest fiends who attacked my father's train that night, and in cold blood butchered all save myself? Do you know that I have lived for vengeance? The person who offers me the only kindness that I have received in these woods since that night of blood, has promised to hunt the wolves of murder down. He may be on their trail now! I have asked to be permitted to follow him; but he says 'no!' and here I stay until he brings the instigator of that massacre to me."

A strange smile played with Rafe Armstrong's lips while the girl talked excitedly for revenge.

"When war he here last?" the outlaw asked.

"Yesterday."

"What do you think of him?"

"What should a person in my situation think of the only one who proffers friendship?"

"Oh, thet's a question. I wanted an answer. Now, to come down to business: Do you love that man?"

The girl hesitated, evidently startled and astonished.

"Why these questions?" she said coming forward as if puzzled by the outlaw's manner and the smile on his swarthy face. "You are smiling, and by it you mean something. Why should I *not* love the man who is to befriend me? Tell me this, and then I will answer you."

"Just like the women in the city," and Rafe Armstrong burst into a loud guffaw, whose coarseness made the chasm ring.

It made the girl blush and look indignant.

"Why it isn't natural for a person in your fix to fall in love with the rascal who did you all the harm he could!" the forest freebooter said at the end of his laugh.

The hand which had left his arm now closed upon it again; and a face painful in its blanched eagerness was upturned to the deserter.

"Oh, tell me what you darkly hint at!" the girl cried. "You do not mean—no! no!"

"Thet's jest what I mean!" was the interruption. "W'arn't I thar? and oughtn't I to know? Yes, my little gal, the man what has pretended to be your friend is the rascal who led the attack on Collyer's train! He has lied to you. You may have heard of Captain Dave—"

"Yes! yes! he told me that he would hunt Captain Dave down, and bring him to me to be dealt with as I elected."

"Just one of his tricks!" laughed Armstrong. "He is Cap'n Dave himself. He's pulled the wool over yer eyes completely."

The white-faced girl did not answer for a moment. She stood like a statue before the outlaw, a look of incredulity in her eyes. Rafe saw that she doubted him.

"I tell the truth, gal!" he said with an earnestness that sent conviction like an arrow to her heart. "He is the vulture of these woods. We've hed a diffikilty; at loggerheads, you see!"

"Now I know whom to hunt!" cried the girl, seizing a rifle that leaned against the wall of the cave. "My father's blood calls for vengeance. A lie has kept meathree long years from the path of justice; but now these woods shall know a trailer as implacable as the Indians who inhabit them. Love you, Noel Gordon? No! There was a something that withheld my love. Now the mask ~~is~~ been torn off. I see in you that Captain Dave; whose villainy has made the wagon-roads through these forests red with human gore. Hear me, Heaven! and let the hand of Violet Collyer do the duty which the dead demands of it. Not one fiend shall escape!"

The terrible oath whitened the outlaw's cheeks, and he involuntarily shrank from the girl, who, standing in the strong starlight with hand uplifted toward the firmament, looked like a young queen of tragedy.

"Not one? That takes me in!" muttered the white-faced wretch. "I wish I hadn't sprung the subject!"

Shrinking from Violet Collyer, he approached the dark figure in the shadows. Another step, and he would tread on the hidden Pottawatomie.

But the Indian's eyes were upon him, and all at once a knife flashed for a moment in the starlight.

With a wild shriek Armstrong felt the blade enter his flesh, and staggered past the girl.

Sharp Knife sprung to his feet to find the avenger's rifle at his breast.

He started back, hesitated a moment, and fled down the ravine.

But the fair avenger saw the flying figure, and before it could lose itself in the shadows, a flash lit up the little cave.

Sharp Knife fell forward on his face!

CHAPTER V.

THE TWO CAPTAINS.

At the report of Nightingale Nat's rifle, fired point-blank into Zimri Paddock's face, a figure moving through the forest at no great distance from the spot, came to a sudden halt, and a strange ejaculation was heard.

"It came from the place whar I left the leetle 'un!" said the person in the wood, in tones that betrayed much anxiety. "I'm not used to the crack of his weepin, so I can't tell whether it war his. Howsomever, if the boy is attacked, I guess he will give the enemy the best he's got."

The speaker quickened his gait, and was soon advancing through the wood at no inconsiderable speed.

"I've heerd strange things to-night," he continued, as he hurried along, "an' it makes me sort o' anxious-like about the boy. That skunk of a White Vulture would never hev teched a blanket in Captain Rough's train if he had known who he war. Now we'll see a pretty partnership in these parts. One wolf will go in with the other, an' the boy'll hev to look out."

At the pace which bore the speaker through the forest, he was not long in reaching the tree in which but a short time previous Nat had been hidden.

An ominous silence brooded over the spot.

"Nat, my leetle one?" said the man, approaching the giant of the woods. "Wal, I'm back again. You're uncommon still, I'm thinkin'!"

But no reply came from the depths of the tree, and Shadow-Shot thrust his great hand into the hollow.

It encountered nothing.

"Gone! by hokey!" exclaimed the ranger. "He didn't go away on his own account. Thet isn't his style. Now ther'll be somebody waked up hereabouts. Plates and platters! The chaps what took the leetle feller hev stirred up the lion, an' his name is Shadow-Shot, late of Illinois!"

As the ranger withdrew his hand, he felt a slippery something which, though he saw it not, convinced him that it was blood.

He stepped back and examined the ground as carefully as the faint light permitted, but the search did not enlighten him.

"It's back to the train now," he said, rising, with a sigh of disappointment. "I war follered when I left it, an' the chap what took the boy will carry him back to Captain Rough."

Shadow-Shot searched no longer in the vicinity of the hollow tree; but tightened his belt, and began to retrace his steps.

He believed that Nightingale Nat had been re-

captured by one of Rough's men, who would, of course, attempt to return him to his chief. A man had followed him and the boy from the train for the purpose of recovering the boy. Thus the ranger reasoned, but that he was wrong for once, the continuation of our story will show.

At the place where the Vultures had fallen upon Captain Rough's train a scene striking in its singularity, for that region, was taking place.

The Vultures had ceased to plunder the wagons. With sullen looks and muttered anathemas, the outlaws were replacing many articles which they had greedily seized upon during the attack. The keen eyes of Captain Dave were upon them. He was commanding them to replace various things; and was superintending the righting of several wagons and was overseeing the refitting of the train.

Moving here and there among the busy scenes appeared a number of Captain Rough's men, who had sneaked back after the sudden lull in the fight to see the two leaders talking together like old acquaintances, and finally to mingle with their late foes.

Each deserter, as he returned, found himself questioned eagerly by Rough, concerning the missing boy. The brutal man seemed much exercised over the youth's absence, and more than once in no measured terms, he cursed the man who had late appeared as Nat's protector.

"The train can proceed now," the Apollo of the woods said, coming up to Rough, who had been leaning against a tree for an hour, with arms folded upon his chest, and eyes regarding the repairing of the mishap.

Captain Rough did not move.

"We cannot tarry here," continued the brigand biting his lip. "My men are in no good humor. The Indians would not have worked five minutes longer. Look! I have made them restore everything, even the little keg in the hindmost wagon."

"Open it for them, and let them fill themselves!" blurted Rough.

"No!" was the firm reply. "We'd have pandemonium here in less than thirty minutes. There's bad blood in my men; but little good in yours, captain, and the two streams would be sure to collide. We must separate. Look at that old Pottawatomie yonder. He is telling his comrades how easily they could hamstring the oxen, and plunder the wagons which they have just reloaded. If you will not move, I must."

"Then move it shall be!" said Rough stepping from the tree. "I'll count my men. I had sixteen when you came down upon us."

In a few minutes the captain of the train had marshaled his force and counted thirteen. Three were missing: Nightingale Nat, Paddock, and Jack Gustin, a man whom the captain, styled a "do-nothing," whose absence was better than his company.

With subdued anger which was displayed in lowering brows and flashing eyes, the outlaws saw their expected prey about to be snatched from their grasp. They could not fathom the motive which had prompted their leader to send Captain Rough away with his, to them,

valuable goods restored. Their glances shot angrily at the Apollo who stood beside the head wagon, holding Rough's hand in his own. One by one the whips were recovered and again they cut the air and cracked over the heads of the oxen.

It was now near daybreak.

"Captain, I'll be up by the lake-shore by-and-by," the chief of the Vultures said as he held Rough's hand and looked into his face. "'Pon my word! if I had known who commanded this train, there would have been no attack. You can go straight through to the mines now; but you'll not find an ounce of gold there—not an ounce!"

Captain Rough's eyes had a merry twinkle.

"Gold!" he echoed. "Ain't I gettin' lots of it for this trip?"

"Oh, yes!" was the reply, accompanied by a light laugh. "But that old chap will cheat you out of it if I don't outgeneral him."

"You must!"

"I will!"

"You will come as soon as it is done?"

"Do you want me to join you sooner?"

"No! no!" said Rough, quickly.

"Now, good-by, captain. I can't hold my dogs off longer; their growls get louder."

Then the outlaw chief released the captain's hand and sprung hastily to the horse which had carried him to the train.

Vaulting into the saddle with the grace of a cavalier, he turned to his men, and in a tone of authority not to be disputed by the most daring, ordered them to turn their faces from the wagons.

Sullenly they obeyed.

"Now go!" he shouted to Rough. "Give your brutes the command."

The next moment the wagons creaked and started on again, the grumbling of the wheels mingling with the blasphemy of the teamsters eager to leave the Vultures behind.

Captain Rough, mounted on a horse, put himself in advance of the first wagon, and was the first person who passed from the Apollo's sight.

At last the teams faded from the vision of the Wisconsin bandit; but the curses of the drivers and the rumbling of the heavy vehicles proclaimed the route.

"Now, back!" Captain Dave said to his sullen men. "A richer train than that will soon fall into our hands. Captain Rough and I used to be boys together."

There was no reply to his words. He seemed to feel the pulse of his discomfited party, and wisely refrained from exciting it.

"Oho! Captain Rough," he said to himself, with a smile. "You think I couldn't read your eyes. Old fellow, I know you like a book. The idea of you going to Lake Superior, leaving that boy in these woods, is the height of absurdity. Why, you'll not lead your train a mile, you old double-faced villain! There's too much money trembling in the balance just now to keep you on the road to the copper mines."

The bandit captain was not wrong in his predictions, for the first streaks of day that illumined a Wisconsin forest found Captain Rough riding slowly southward alone. The train was

not in sight, and its monotonous rumble had passed entirely beyond hearing.

The villain had deserted his men in the forest, and was on the "back track."

"Dave Sepoy thought I was an idiot when he supposed I would go on and leave the boy to be cared for by *him*!" muttered the ruffian with a smile. "I want the blood of that man who stepped between me and the lad."

The eyes of Captain Rough flashed madly as the words fell from his lips. He wanted to encounter Shadow-Shot.

All at once the report of a rifle startled the captain, and he felt his horse sinking to the ground!

With a loud cry Rough leaped from the saddle, and raised his rifle; but before he could throw it to his shoulder, a tall ungainly figure sprung upon his path and a pistol was thrust into his face.

"Shadow-Shot, at your sarvice!" cried a rough voice. "The very man you want to see, accordin' to yer talk. Now, cap'n, we'll compare accounts, an' mebbe we'll squar' 'em afore we're through!"

Captain Rough looked into the flashing eyes of the tall ranger, and his face grew white.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SONG IN PERIL.

"MEBBE as how I don't know how to sarve ye?"

"What are you going to do with me?"

"Not let you go, of course. Now I can't say that I hev any partic'lar ill feelin' ag'in' ye; but you hev got me into an onpleasant predicament. Didn't ye keep on singin' until them wood rangers flopped down upon us, an' cut right an' left until Zim Paddock is the only survivor of Cap'n Rough's train? An' didn't ye try to drive a bullet through my skull a while back? I ought to love ye fur these two leetle kindnesses, oughtn't I, young 'un? 'Pon my honor! I ought to adopt ye; but I guess I'll not take that responsibility at present."

There was a savage leer in the eyes that overlooked a face begrimed with forest dust and blood—an admixture hideously repulsive.

"Have ye any money on yer person?" the man suddenly asked.

"Not a cent."

"Do ye ever expect to get any—I mean, hain't you got a rich father, or uncle, or some kind o' kin who is goin' to do well by you one o' these days?"

The eyes of the boy dilated at the singular question, and became riveted with an expression of wonder upon Paddock.

"What makes you think I have?" he asked.

"That is buckin' one question ag'in' another," Paddock cried, chagrined. "I'm not obleeged to answer, am I? Well, I've got two eyes in my head. I've had 'em thar fur forty-two year. I kin see some things when it tain't too dark. Yer hands war white as the skin on your breast when I first saw you with Cap'n Rough. They've been browned by the climate whar we've been. Now come out an' say fur honest, boy, if you hev'n't got a prospect fur money ahead."

"I do not know!" was Nat's reply. "I'm sure that I am no blood kin to Cap'n Rough."

"So war all of us," Paddock said, with a smile. "Many's the time I've told the boys, Jack Gustin in partic'lar, that you war no more his boy than mine. Whar did you come from?"

The curiosity of the man who stood before Nightingale Nat in the midst of a forest with a coil of rope in his hand, was of the most intense kind. He seemed to believe that he stood on the threshold of a secret which, if disclosed, would bring to his empty coffers that god which he worshiped with the miser's adoration. But it appeared ready to take flight, and leave him, moneyless still.

"Zimri Paddock, what are you going to do with me?" the boy suddenly demanded, totally ignoring the ruffian's eagerness.

"That depends on your own actions!" was the rejoinder.

"You mean to hang me here in the woods with that rope?"

"Not exactly a hangin'," laughed the villain. "I hain't got time to parley here. Can't you hear a strange noise over your left shoulder? The scent of my own blood is the cause of them sounds. Say, talk to me. Whar did you come from when Cap'n Rough took you up? That's what I want to know!"

"I lived in a city then."

"Just as I imagined. Go on!"

"My father made fireworks in a little shop—"

"Stop!" thundered Paddock. "I don't want a lie—no fixed-up story here, my young lark!"

Nat's face flushed with indignation.

"It is not a lie, sir!" he cried. "You would not say that the second time if I stood free on this spot!"

Paddock laughed brutishly, and showed his colored teeth.

"Yer hands say that you never helped make fireworks," he said, eying the youth. "Now tell the truth, or, by the eyes of me! I'll settle the matter between us right here!"

"Why should I lie, Zimri Paddock? Captain Rough took me from the shop with the consent of the man who called me his son."

"He wasn't your father, though?" the man cried, with a joyful start.

"I don't know—but I—I think not."

"Ab! *think* not!" was the ferocious cry. "That's your way of beatin' around the bush. Well, gold or no gold, I'll bring matters to a crisis."

Setting his lips firmly behind the last word, Zimri Paddock pushed our hero against the little tree beneath which they had halted, and proceeded at once to throw the cord around his body.

Nightingale Nat fixed his eyes on the villain; but did not put in a word of pleading.

Mercy seemed a stranger to Captain Rough's money-loving tool.

The cords were wielded without pity, and Nat found his body drawn painfully close to the tree.

He almost wished that the hand of Paddock had not relaxed on his trachea when he roughly drew him from the hollow tree, as we have already related.

"Now, beauty!" cried Paddock, as he flung

the lash-like ends of the rope into the prisoner's face. "A person with half sense could tell what this tyin' means. You had to sing the train to its death, an' thar's half of my cheek carried away by yer bullet. I guess I'll live over it if I git away from hyar soon. So you came from a fire-works shop, eh?"

"I did."

"Mighty tart!" sneered Paddock, cut by the brief reply. "I'm thinkin' yer sentences will be longer afore mornin'. Tell me who you really are, an' by the eyes of me! I'll turn kind an' tramp you out o' these woods."

"I have already told you. I am not going to purchase my liberty with a lie!"

"Oho!" cried Paddock, lifting his head and giving a prolonged whistle. "I guess you're nothin' worth savin' after all. But the cap'n did act as if you war a valuable prize. Strange! Now good-by, my nightingale. If thar be any gold comin' to you not one dollar will ever shine on your hand. Because why, my bird? Because Zimri Paddock left ye tied to a tree in the big woods of Wisconsin, to be eaten by wolves an' b'ars!"

Did the boy's cheeks blanch?

No; his eyes flashed fire at the merciless speaker, and his lips, a trifle paler than usual, closed with determination.

The man picked up his rifle and stepped back, followed by the eyes of Nightingale Nat.

"Ar'n't ye goin' to beg?" he exclaimed in surprise.

"Not to you!" was the reply. "Zimri Paddock, if I should get away from this tree alive you will have an enemy who will hunt you not only in these woods but far beyond them—wherever you go. He will hunt you to death!"

"If you get away, eh?" laughed Paddock with the coarseness of the deep-dyed villain. "Jest try the ropes, my cherubim, an' see if thar's any danger of that. I fancy thet you would be a bad enemy; but you're one what will never foller me—never, my lad!"

Paddock now stepped further back until his burly figure gradually grew indistinct to the bound boy.

"It's good-by fur good!" came a voice from the deeper shadows—a voice which Nat recognized as his tormentor's.

"Perhaps!" murmured the nightingale; but he did not send the word into the wood for he knew that it would occasion an outburst of coarse ruffianism.

He had heard enough of Zimri Paddock's voice for the present.

Perhaps he might hear it in the future freighted with the brute's death-cry.

Perhaps!

The footsteps died away and Nightingale Nat was alone.

"There're two reasons why I want to get out of this scrape," he muttered to himself. "I want to know who I am, and I want to pay off some old scores. The old man who made fire-works can not be my father. He indentured me to Captain Rough for a purpose. Paddock suspects as much. Rockets and Roman-candles! when I get away from this tree, I'll hunt Shadow-Shot up, and we'll pay off several old scores. Captain Rough will laugh should he

learn from Paddock that I was left here. He brought me into these woods for some terrible reason. I know it. Oh! Father above, shall all their villainy triumph?"

Strong in his indignation, Nightingale Nat tried his bonds; but his trial caused them to cut into his flesh, and, with a groan, he desisted.

"Wolves and bears, he said," the boy ejaculated. "Just let them keep away till morning. Shadow-Shot will not give me up until he finds me again. I've got a big friend in that old hunter, and I'm going to stick to him, too."

The little captive remained so quiet for an hour after his muttered resolve, that a person standing a few feet away would not have been aware of his presence.

It grew suddenly dark with the shadows whose greatest intensity precedes the dawn.

"It's no use!" Nat exclaimed all at once. "I can't sleep, and talking doesn't do me any good. Crackers and torpedoes! I've got to sing. If I did sing the train into danger, please good fortune, I may sing myself out of it. So here goes, hit or miss. When I want to sing I feel miserable if I don't send the notes skipping up my throat."

Then out into the depths of that lonely Wisconsin forest, floated the wild musical notes of the doomed boy.

He sung with the zest of a person infatuated by the spell of music, and a listener would never have dreamed that the singer was bound to a tree, and had been left to the mercy of the maddest tenants of that dark forest.

Louder and clearer grew the strains as the song advanced, and the boy seemed to forget his situation in the melody of the bird-like trills.

Did any human beings hear?

Yes.

A man seated on a horse—a man who wore a broad-brimmed hat, and carried a rifle across the saddle.

"There's the accursed boy!" he said, gathering up the reins. "Why, in the name of heaven! is he singing now? Is he crazy? He'll sing a bullet to his heart if he doesn't stop!"

The second person who heard was a girlish looking individual who had been brought to a halt by the weird song.

She, too, carried a rifle.

"What is it?" she asked herself, with all the curiosity of her sex fully aroused. "What but some person singing out there in the woods. The voice comes no nearer. It is not the voice of a man; it is a boy's. I wonder if he belongs to the train?"

After listening to the song for a moment, the pretty speaker started in the direction of the singer.

Almost at the same time, the man on horseback began to approach Nightingale Nat, but from a nearly opposite direction.

As for the boy, he stopped suddenly and exclaimed:

"The wolves are answering me. Well, I thought I could not sing, even in these woods, and not get an answer from some kind of throat."

He did not exhibit signs of fright.

On the contrary, he smiled at his own words.

CHAPTER VII.

A RETURN TO PLUNDER.

"YES, mebbe we'll squar' accounts cap'n."

Captain Rough looked into the stern countenance of the man who stood before him, pistol in hand.

Then he glanced at his horse, lying motionless on the leaves beside him.

"Dead as a door-nail," Shadow-Shot said, with a grin, as he noticed the *coup d'œil*. "Now let's come to business."

The man stepped nearer.

"In the first place, cap'n, whar is the leetle one?"

Rough started at the question.

It told him that Nightingale Nat's whereabouts were not known to the ranger.

"Do not ask me," he said. "All I know is that you were with him, when I saw him last—down at the place where we fought the robbers."

"Fought?" sneered the gaunt ranger. "You don't pretend to say that you fought the White Vultures, eh, cap'n?"

Rough flushed.

"Oh, it paints your face when a feller talks about that terrible resistance what you made to the robbers. Why, your cowardly men could have wiped out every robber, an' avenged the massacre of Collyer an' his men."

The ranger's lips closed madly behind the last words.

"I thought I could rely on my men," Rough said. "When they deserted me, I, of course, could not contend with the bandits alone."

"Did you, cap'n?" taunted the ranger, a merry gleam in his dark eyes. "How about thet hand-shaking thet took place at the train, an' why was the wagons allowed to go on? Thar's a leetle explanation wanted on this partic'lar p'int, cap'n. What d'ye say to it?"

The man in the toils saw that prevarication would effect nothing with the ranger, so he said:

"In Captain Dave, I unexpectedly found an old acquaintance, who permitted me to proceed. I did not know he was in these parts."

"I did!" said Shadow-Shot, significantly.

"An old friend, eh? Friends yet, cap'n?"

"That must depend upon circumstances."

"Jess so. Now for the next question. Who is thet youngster?"

"My nephew."

"'Pon honor, cap'n?"

"Yes, sir."

"Cap'n, that is what I call a lie."

Rough flushed indignantly.

"Oh! git red if you wish!" said Shadow-Shot; "I'm not swallowin' everything thet's put into my mouth. Your nephew? If he's yourn, he's mine. What war thet you war sayin' to yourself jest afore I give your horse the dead-drop? Suthin' about huntin' the leetle one down, in these parts. Come, cap'n, I'm one o' these fellars what bates to the bottom of my heart any man who persecutes a boy. I hed a leetle chap once, an' not very far from byar he sleeps at the foot of a big tree. I put him thar, cap'n, with my own hands. He war killed by a friend o' yourn. Now, d'ye see, I kind o' likes boys. I always takes their parts, an' when a man lifts

his paw ag'in' one, he riles Shadow-Shot to the eend of his nature. You war talkin' about doin' dirt to the boy what sings. I heerd you, cap'n. He hezn't got many friends in these parts, but hyar's one that intends to stick to him through thick an' thin, rain an' shine—Shadow-Shot, at your sarvice!"

"Why should I lie to you?" Rough said, putting on that bold face which men of his ilk can assume at will. "You have me in your power. Would a lie do me any good now?"

The ranger shook his head.

"Not much, cap'n, fur, mind you, the man what steps on the leetle one's toes comes squar' down on my hull foot. He isn't your nephew. I know that."

"Then why the question?"

"Because I wanted to see if you wouldn't lie. Out with the truth."

"I can but rehearse my former statement."

The ranger was puzzled. He seemed to believe that his man had spoken the truth.

Captain Rough took hope.

"Well, mebbe it is a fact," Shadow-Shot said.

"You kin go back to the train, I guess. We'll not settle accounts now. But the time is comin' when more'n one will be settled in these woods."

The train? why it was lumbering through the forest several miles to the north. Captain Rough had deserted it. Would he return?

"I don't want you hangin' around me!" the ranger cried, seeing the man hesitate. "Go back to your comrades."

"My train is far away and my horse is dead."

"You may be thankful that your own skull hasn't got a hole in it. The best thing you kin do, cap'n, is to go south, an' keep on goin' until you git to the end of it. This isn't a healthy kentry fur such people as you, an' while I make my home hyar, it are likely to stav thet way. I'll take care of your friend, Cap'n Dave."

Captain Rough, who should have thanked the ranger for sparing his life, gritted his teeth and looked sullenly north.

As far assight could reach, he saw the forest stretching in unbroken grandeur. Daylight was fast illumining the dark aisles, and the cheering rays of the sun would soon add their splendor to the scene.

The woods of Wisconsin were new to him; but he was not a novice in woodcraft.

"Well then you kin stay hyar, an' go when you git ready!" blurted the ranger. "I'm goin'. No follerin', cap'n, fur my old gun shoots back'ards as well as for'ards."

The ranger now stepped back, and moving quite rapidly away, left Captain Rough alone in the forest.

The trees soon hid him from his sight.

"A lie was believed, and not for the first time, either," Rough said, with a light chuckle.

"Here I am, my horse dead as a herring, and the boy somewhere loose in the woods. He's not with that villainous ranger. Where he is, I must know. When I started with him, I gave my word that somewhere between the big brown-stone house and Lake Superior he should find a grave, and Captain Rough is going to keep it. The train? Curse the cowards! Let them go on and die in the copper country. I've cut loose from the skunks, and they will wait

in vain for me. No! Shadow-Shot, I'll follow if I choose, and at the first opportunity, I'll send a bullet through your brain. I started out to find the boy, and I'll tramp these woods over from the lake to the southernmost river, but that I fulfill my part of the bond."

Captain Rough was a man of iron will. Nothing could daunt him. He had a purpose in view, and to carry it out was his fixed intention.

He did not stir until the ranger had passed entirely from sight.

He let half an hour elapse before, with that doggedness that sometimes courts death, he threw himself upon Shadow-Shot's trail.

The light increasing as he advanced, showed him the forest; it made the trail of the gaunt ranger as plain as the captain could desire. He believed that it would lead him to Nightingale Nat, for Shadow-Shot was no doubt acquainted with the paths of the wilderness, while, to him, they were, as yet, bordered with mystery.

There came all at once a sound from the southwest that startled the ruffian leader of the train.

He quickly threw himself behind a tree, and saw a number of horsemen—white men and Indians—come suddenly into view.

"The Vultures again!" the captain ejaculated, recognizing the party. "They're following the train. Heaven helps the cowards this time!"

Hugging the tree closely to prevent his presence being made known to the plunderers, Captain Rough counted their numbers. He saw the whites who filled the saddles like veritable bandits, and the Indians, who, disdaining the artificial seats, sat astride of the bare backs of their steeds.

But he noticed that Captain Dave did not lead them.

Had the insatiate Vultures turned from their leader for the purpose of finishing the destruction of the train? Perhaps, in a mutiny, they had made themselves leaderless, and were rushing to new scenes of blood. With his eyes fixed upon the riders, Captain Rough crouched at the trunk of the tree.

He felt no pity for the men he had cruelly deserted. He blessed the fortune which had parted him from the train. The fiends of the woods would not spare a man!

On came the bandits, unconscious of the captain's presence. They threatened to ride him down, but all at once they veered to the right and left him undisturbed.

"Go!" he exclaimed, looking after them. "May never a one of you come back. Ha! there's another train which will not reach the mines."

Fast upon the utterance of the last word came a startling sound to Rough's ears.

His eyes were still fixed upon the horsemen, and he saw one throw his hands up wildly and pitch headlong from the steed.

"That's sudden" the captain said. "I want a little warning before I go. Who did that? It wasn't Shadow-Shot for he's ahead. Bless me! if a man is safe five minutes at a time in these parts."

He crouched lower among the bushes that sur-

rounded the root of the tree, for the bandits had drawn rein and were looking toward him.

What if they should discover his figure, and with cries of vengeance for the blood just shed, swoop down like eagles of death upon him?

Captain Rough held his breath and drew the hammer of his rifle slowly back.

All hopes of catching Nightingale Nat seemed at that moment to vanish from his heart!

CHAPTER VIII

A HEART TWICE "COVERED."

LEAVING Captain Rough in momentary expectation of an attack from the freebooters so suddenly brought to a halt by the death shot, let us return to the central character of our story, Nightingale Nat, whom we left filling the forest with one of his songs.

The reader will recollect that his notes reached the ears of two persons, one of whom, a man on horseback, we left approaching the boy.

Some time elapsed between the cessation of the song and the sound of a horse's tramp.

"That is not a wolf," the boy said, raising his head as the noise saluted his ears. "I wonder who I have sung to me this time."

Nearer and nearer came the animal, unseen because of the night that still enshrouded his surroundings. He did not fear a return of Paddock, for that worthy had evidently left him for good, and would be the last to return to his succor.

"He must be near here," he heard a voice say, as the tread of the animal ceased not far away.

Nat held his breath.

"If the boy but knew that I wanted to save him, he would let me know by some noise where he is."

The Nightingale started with hope at the last words of the unseen.

"Here I am!" he said, and he heard an ejaculation of joy greet him.

A minute later the nose of a horse brushed his face, and he saw a human figure spring from the saddle.

"Hol! here you are!" cried the new-comer. "Well, well, I did not expect to find you so soon!"

The voice, changed to its natural tone, was enough to send cold blood to the boy's heart.

He saw the sombrero-like hat of the man who had sprung to the ground.

It was Captain Dave, the leader of the Vultures!

"Who did this?" cried the man, laying hold on the cords.

"One of Captain Rough's men—Zimri Paddock."

"Oho! why, he tied you for keeps, didn't he? Well, I'm going to untie you; just see!"

Suiting the action to his words, Captain Dave, the Apollo, severed the ropes, and the little captive, with an exclamation of joy he could not suppress, stepped from the tree.

But he was not free; the fingers of the Apollo encircled his arm!

"You got away from the train to-night with that long hunter who calls himself Shadow-Shot," said the Vulture, eying the boy. "Where is he?"

"I do not know. He was not near when Paddock fastened me to the tree."

"I reckon not," Captain Dave said, with a smile. "You will go with me?"

The boy's recollection flew back to the meeting of the two ruffians during the attack on the train.

"I will not go back to Captain Rough," he cried, [jerking away from the hand that held him.

With an oath, the outlaw sprung forward, but before he could touch the boy, the latter had thrown himself upon the horse, and drawn a pistol from the heavy holster!

"Lift a hand and I'll blow you to Davy Jones's locker," cried the little imp. "I guess the tables have turned, my Captain of the Vultures. This saddle suits me to a 'T,' and I'm going to keep it. Rockets and torpedoes! I'll laugh at Captain Rough when I ride away on this horse. The old scoundrel brought me into this forest to get me out of somebody's road. Didn't he tell you about it, Captain Dave, while you talked to him at the train?"

The Apollo, completely in Nat's power, grated his teeth, but did not reply.

"Oh, you needn't answer if you've got the sulks!" the singer said. "The less I hear of your voice the better, perhaps. Now I'm going away. I may return the horse some day, but that's hardly likely. Don't you see I've got the pistol at your head? Stars and firebugs! couldn't I do justice a service now by touching the trigger! Oh, my rascal, I've a mind to drop you where you stand."

Still no reply.

"See here!" suddenly cried the boy, leaning forward with eagerness. "What's that mystery about Collyer's train? There're Collyers in the big city where I came from, and they're rich, too. One of our neighbors, a widow woman, is named Collyer. 'Pears to me that her husband went off somewhere, years ago, and hasn't come back yet. Was he the Collyer who commanded the train plundered by you and your devils in the woods five years ago?"

"I don't know!" was the snappish reply. "My little demon, if I had you in my hands for just one moment—"

"I wouldn't be inquiring about the Collyer train, eh?"

"No!"

"Well, we'll bring this scene to a close. Captain Dave, there is a law in the forest which is respected in the cities. Here it is wild. I am going to kill you. Roman candles and rockets! that's plain talk but it's business. You have lorded it over these woods long enough. You and your men have made the paths to Lake Superior paths of blood. In your fury, you have not spared the dumb oxen that drew the wagons. If I did not take your worthless life, you would hunt me down and mercilessly slay."

"That is true!" said the Apollo savagely and with candor.

"Look up and say where you want it," the boy said sternly.

The outlaw's handsome face grew white. He shrunk from the determined boy, who filled his saddle and held his pistol in his hand.

Death was most certainly before him. His

executioner—the avenger of blood—held the weapon at his breast.

Nightingale Nat saw the sign of cowardice that betrayed Captain Dave's true nature.

"Are you afraid?" he cried in derision. "I allow that it does go hard with a fellow as pretty as you are to look death squarely in the face. But turn your head if you can't give the old boy your eye. Quick! I cannot sit here all night. Where will you take the bullet, Captain Dave—in the heart, or straight through the brain?"

For a moment there was no response.

"Well, if it must come, let it be here!" suddenly cried the Apollo of the woods, tearing wide his rich coat and exposing his breast. "A bullet in the heart doesn't mar the beauty of the face. The man who says that Captain Dave is afraid to die, shoots a lie from his tongue!"

Standing erect, with his breast bared to receive the deadly bullet of his boy-executioner, the Vulture captain presented a tragic appearance.

"I can't do it!" cried Nightingale Nat. "I can't shoot a man who can bare his breast for the bullet. I'm no murderer. I never willfully shed blood in all my life, and I can't do it now. Pick up your rifle and try to shoot me and I'll drop you too quick. No! Captain Dave, bad as you are, Nightingale Nat can't take your life now. So now good-night. Keep away from me, for, by my life! this circumstance will never be duplicated!"

Nightingale Nat gathered up the reins and turned the animal's head.

Captain Dave breathed freer and sent a grim smile at the boy.

But he would not thank him for sparing his life.

It was getting lighter. Objects were becoming distinguishable at a distance.

With a wave of the hand, in mock adieu, the little imp turned from the captain of the Vultures. He galloped away quite briskly, while the Apollo sprang to his rifle.

Seizing it, he turned quickly toward the victor, and gave a peculiar whistle.

The horse instantly stopped, planting his feet firmly on the ground and almost sending Nat, rocket-like over his head!

It was in vain that he spoke to the steed. The animal would not budge.

"Fire and furies!" he cried, turning his head as he raised the pistol. "This is a trick I never dreamed of."

It was indeed a trick that threatened to bring his career to a sudden close.

He was beyond pistol-shot; but the captain of the Vultures, so lately discomfited, stood erect, covering his body with the rifle.

"The tables are turned, my little demon!" came the triumphant tones of Captain Dave. "Now we'll see an empty saddle in less than a minute. You may spare a foe, but I never do!"

The cheek of the speaker dropped again to the rifle.

There was a second of awful stillness.

"Shoot if you dare, Captain Dave. I have turned vengeance-hunter!"

These words, clear, distinct, and musical as the sound of a silver bell, startled man and boy.

Captain Dave lowered the gun and looked up.

Not far away, resting on one knee in true hunter fashion, with her rifle against her flushed cheek, he saw the girl called Violet Collyer.

"I know you now!" she continued. "You have lived a lie to me for five years. You are Captain Dave, the king of the forest Vultures."

More than half-bewildered at the sight of the girl, Nightingale Nat kept his eyes fixed upon her.

"Shadow-Shot has talked about a girl who would make things lively for the Vultures one of these days. I wonder if that is the one?" he murmured.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CHAMPION LIAR.

"You will put aside the rifle!"

The voice of the girl addressed to Captain Dave was gentle, yet full of firmness, and, with much apparent sullenness, he obeyed.

"Will you not go and leave us here?" she continued, turning to Nightingale Nat, who had remained a speechless and bewildered spectator of the scene.

The boy started at the request, and hesitated.

"And leave you with that man, who, if he hates you, would not hesitate to send a bullet into your heart?"

"He will lift no rifle against me," the girl responded. "I want to be alone with him."

"I will not cross you, girl; but I will keep within call."

"No! no! Go beyond that. Ride on until you cross a stream. On the further bank you may wait for me."

"That I will," said Nat.

It was with reluctance that the boy left the girl and the captain of the Vultures alone in the forest; but, as the former had saved his life, he felt that he should obey her without equivocation.

"Now," said the forest girl, approaching Captain Dave, "we are alone. What say you to the lie you have lived to me for five years?"

He looked into her face, and burst into a boisterous laugh that made her cheeks tingle.

"A lie? Who has been filling you with such nonsense?" he cried. "Did you not call me Captain Dave awhile since? Why, that is the name of the wretch who leads the Vultures—the man against whom we have sworn vengeance. Why, Violet, I am inclined to believe that you are losing your wits. What! do you think that I would have placed myself so often in your power, if I were the real Captain Dave—the fiend who brutally butchered your father and his train?"

The man's words staggered the girl; they made a serious breach in her credulity.

Was that man telling the truth? She looked searchingly into the depths of his eyes, as if by fathoming them she would get to his heart—his inmost thoughts. Swiftly across her mind rushed that thrilling scene in the night just passed, when Rafe Armstrong invaded her secluded home and declared that the man who called himself Noel Gordon to her face was the veritable Vulture chief—the man whose blood, above all others, the cause of justice demanded,

Rafe Armstrong was a Vulture, and he professed to know the man of numerous *aliases*, for had he not served under his leadership in the forest foray for many years of blood and plunder?

And now this Noel Gordon stood before her with the hat which Captain Dave was wont to wear—the broad-brimmed hat, looped up at the left side with a gold buckle; she saw the brigandish cut of his garments, and yet he declared that he was the Noel Gordon who had befriended her in the Wisconsin woods since the massacre of Collyer's train.

"Who has told you this, Violet?" he cried the second time, coming forward when he saw the effect produced by his last words—his startling denial. "Somebody has invaded your home since my departure—somebody with poison on his lips and hatred in his heart for me—for both of us."

"I have been visited. A man was there last night—and an Indian, too."

Captain Dave started.

"Did they come together?"

"I do not know. The Indian seems to have followed the white, for in my presence he struck him with his knife, and ran like a deer."

"Well?"

Eagerness pervaded the outlaw's tone. He felt that Sharp Knife had accomplished the mission upon which he had sent him.

"But the red-man did not get far," Violet said with eyes sparkling with excitement. "He paid for that blow, for it was a coward's. I shot him, and he fell somewhere near the spring. I did not go down."

Captain Dave's face grew slightly pale.

"They must have been enemies," he said reflectively. "But the man, Violet? He was the poisoner?"

"He told me that you and Captain Dave were identical," she said frankly. "He said that he belonged to the Vultures but that the chief had dismissed him, and set the Indian upon his trail. He must have been in the wicked band *that night*, for he told me so much about the massacre which I know to be true."

"And he said that I am Captain Dave?" the outlaw said, growing so bold as to smile.

"He did!" the girl answered. "I do not want to believe it, for you have been kind to me. But that hat—these clothes, Noel—I never saw them on your person before."

"I suspect not, Violet. In order to hunt this foe of yours, and mine, as well, I must assume disguises which seem strange and outlandish to you. Do I look like a brigand in this suit?"

For the first time the beautiful vengeance-hunter smiled.

"Now, suppose I was Captain Dave," he said; "suppose every word uttered by that slanderer last night were true—what would you do?"

"I would not spare!" cried the girl, with flashing eyes, as she involuntarily started from the Apollo of the woods. "I have sworn to avenge the massacre of the train, and if I were convinced that you were the fiend that led the demons of slaughter that night, I would send a bullet crashing through your brain."

The attitude of the girl, coupled to the look that clothed her face, sent a cold chill of fear to

Captain Dave's heart. He was standing over the crater of a volcano of destruction which a word—an act of his—might put in awful motion.

"I would forget the many kindnesses you have done me, if I knew you as Captain Dave," she continued. "Why should I not? For five years you have kept me from the path of vengeance; but I am on it now. That man may have lied; but he knew so much about the Vultures and their chief. Why is it that for five years you have accomplished nothing?"

"I admit the prowess of the man I have been trailing. He seems an *ignis fatuus*, which suddenly disappears as you follow. I have tracked him to find myself on the edge of a cliff over which he seemed to leap. Violet, he shall not elude me much longer. This man whom I hate because he made you fatherless, shall fall before me—"

"No! you have promised to let me avenge that night!" the girl cried.

"So I did. I will not forget that. I see that I have enemies! That man who invaded the cave-house last night may have been one of Captain Dave's men; but he was a fool for telling you. Does not the Vulture chief know that I hunt him all the time? Ah! Violet, who knows that he is not at the bottom of it—that he did not send the man to you, to set you against me, and by your hand rid him and the world of me."

"But the Indian?" cried the girl. "Why would a savage follow a Vulture? I thought the two bands were on the most friendly terms."

"Friends fall out sometimes. Where is the white man?"

"He is dead!"

Captain Dave averted his head that the girl might not see the gleam of triumph that lit up the depths of his eyes.

Rafe Armstrong was dead! The garrulous man would bother him no more.

Bolder and bolder grew this living lie in the presence of the fair girl whose hatred for him he had adroitly turned into softer channels. He was playing his cards so well that he ventured into new seas, nor kept near the coast.

"Why, I laugh to think that I have been mistaken by you for Captain Dave!" he said. "Violet, do you think I would stand here, knowing what I do, if I were that scamp? Your trail has led to me instead of the arch-fiend of these woods. If you had not checked me when you did, I might now be on the freshest trail I ever struck."

Violet Collyer opened her eyes and started.

"That boy was a very young imp!" continued the Apollo. "He rides where Captain Dave rides; young as he is, and innocent looking, he has taken a part in the overthrow of more than one train."

Violet looked astounded.

"It is that scamp who has upon several occasions kept his leader from my grasp. He has wit, courage and devilishness enough for a pack of robbers. I was not going to shoot him when you came up. I would have captured him, and forced from him the whereabouts of his master—not very far away at this moment. What did you think of him, girl?"

"Not that he was a Vulture; he is too young!" was the reply. "If I thought of him at all, I regarded him as a boy who may have escaped from some plundered train."

"Boys do not escape when Captain Dave leads," laughed the Apollo. And there was a meanful fiendishness in the information which went to Violet's heart like an arrow of ice. "But we will let the imp go for the present. He has ridden far away ere this. You will go back to the cave now?"

"Were you going there?"

"Yes. The time for you to step personally on the path of vengeance has not yet come."

"When will it come?"

"I do not know—soon, I hope."

"It cannot come too soon! I have waited five years, and to-day I am no nearer Captain Dave than I was then."

She did not see the strange smile that flitted across the half-averted face.

Walking side by side, the singular twain pushed through the forest in a southeasterly direction.

"Over there is the place where you told the young imp to wait for you," Captain Dave said, pointing to a place they were leaving to the right. "He will never wait for you."

"Perhaps not," was the reply. "We will not go over to see, anyhow."

But, seated on the outlaw's horse, in the midst of a thick cluster of trees, Nightingale Nat saw the two walking side by side. The sight made the boy open his eyes, which was filled with genuine wonder.

"What on earth does that mean?" he exclaimed. "Ten minutes ago she had a bead on Captain Dave's head, and now she's walking at his side. It beats the Jews! I'd give this horse to know the meaning of this. I wonder if the girl's in love with that outlaw? No, *she* cannot be!"

Nat watched the twain until they had passed completely from his sight.

"I'd soon know something if Shadow-Shot was here," he said, gathering up the reins. "But I feel one thing: If that girl is Collyer's child, she don't know who she is walking with."

The boy was right!

CHAPTER X.

THE AVENGING SHOT.

"COME like a shadow; go like one—that's the reason, I s'pect."

At the edge of a stream whose banks, towering like precipices far above it, seemed to lose themselves among the stars, sat Shadow-Shot and Nightingale Nat.

The night was about them; but the full-orbed moon that shed her radiance upon the earth relieved the gloom, and rendered the nocturnal season one of splendor and beauty.

The gaunt ranger had a quiet smile on his face when his words, just written, fell upon the boy's ears. They were an answer to a question as to how he had received the quaint name which he bore.

For several days prior to the night now in question the twain had been constant companions. Their meeting in the forest had been a source of pleasure to each, and they had ex-

changed narratives and compared notes of plans formed for the future.

"I'll allow that I've been a shadow-shot to more'n one red-skin," continued the ranger. "I've seen tough times in these parts durin' the last five years. They hev stuck notices on trees givin' me so much time to clear out; but I'm hyar yet, an' hev got a hull scalp left. I don't scare worth a cent. I'm goin' to leave these parts when I git ready, an' not one minnit afore. Business is business, an' I mean business by stayin' hyar. What are you thinkin' about, my leetle one?"

"I was listening to you, sir."

"Not very painfully I guess, or yer face wouldn't hev got so red at my question," said the ranger, smiling. "'Pears to me thet you've got it uncommon bad fur one so young. You war thinkin' about the gal."

The blush on the boy's face grew deeper. It told the story of his thoughts.

"If she likes that fellar it is because she likes a lie!" said Shadow-Shot, clinching his big hand. "If she only knew him! P'raps she would believe me, fur if she has any mem'ry left at all she would know how I used to honey around her, an' make swings fur her all along the road to death."

"Then go and tell her this night!" cried Nightingale Nat, with much earnestness, as he laid his hand on the ranger's arm. "The cave is not far away. Yes, go and open her eyes. She does not—she cannot know that that man is Captain Dave."

"If I thought she knew it, bless me if I wouldn't lose all faith in the female gender!" said the ranger, reflectively. "It is true that the cave is not far away jist now, an' the time fur the other thing is pretty nigh."

"Yes, yes, if she will not believe you at the cave, bring her here, and convince her as they ride by."

"Thet wouldn't be bad," mused Shadow-Shot, as he rose. "Come good or bad, I'll go."

"Whether she believes you or not, you will not stay long?" said the boy.

"No!"

"Then may she come here and know the truth!"

"Oh, she'll come!" was the confident reply. "Go up to the big tree. I'll bring her there. They will not pass afore I git back, an' when they do go by, it will be in the prettiest moonlight that ever fell on the skunks."

With much anxiety and many inward prayers for the success of his mission, Nightingale Nat saw Shadow-Shot depart, and he clambered to the upland through a natural passage in the rocks, and took a station beneath the boughs of a tree.

The noiseless ranger crept along the stream flitting here and there like a real shadow. Now stooping, now erect, or crawling on all-fours like the bear, he made good progress until he presented himself at the mouth of a cave cut as it seemed by a legion of sculptors in the rocky wall.

"Nobody to home?" he exclaimed in his rough speech; but a light cry of mingled fright and astonishment quickly convinced him that the cavern was tenanted.

"I'm opposed to shootin' when I'm the mark," he said as the click of a rifle lock fell upon his ears, and a girlish figure came from the shadows of the cave with a rifle in her hands.

She stepped suddenly before him and threw a wild stare into his unhandsome face.

"I haven't lost much beauty, my leetle one, hev I?" he said with a chuckle that illumined his face with smiles. "Jest keep on lookin' till I git into the moonshine an' then p'r'aps you may be able to recognize me."

As Shadow-Shot spoke he stepped back until his figure was full in the moonlight that streamed into the chasm, and rendered the place almost as light as day.

With wonderment in her eyes, Violet followed him.

"You are not a Vulture," she said, after a short study of his face.

"If I war I wouldn't come to see you," he said. "Jest look closer, my leetle one. Five years ago you used to sit on my hands while I tossed you up and down. That was more fun than ridin' on the ox wagons, eh, my bird?"

"What do I see?" cried the girl, clutching the ranger's arm. "Five years ago! The Vultures made me fatherless then!"

"Yes, an' me horseless—the best animal in these parts!"

"Oh, my mind goes back to that dreadful time," she said. "I thought, a minute since, that I knew you—that you belonged to the train; but it cannot be."

"Can't, my bird? Who used to toss you up an' down on his arms when you war with the train?"

"Matt Pokington!" was the cry.

"Yes, old Matt—a man what would sooner play with you, if you war gittin' to be a woman, than eat. That's me! I'm old Matt Pokington—hev been five years in these parts, payin' off some old scores."

A cry of joy sprung from the lips of the girl.

In one moment she saw the once loved and familiar features of Pokington in the uncouth man before her, and she threw herself into his arms.

"Bless me if I wouldn't like to hold you hyar a year, my leetle one!" cried the old ranger, filling with emotion. "But I want to show you suthin', an' to see it right we've got no time to lose."

But she did not seem to hear him; for she clung to him, and her head was hidden in a bosom in which beat one of the biggest and bravest hearts in the Northwest.

"We've got no time to lose," Shadow-Shot said, firmly yet with gentleness, as he disengaged the girl from him. "Do you know who has been your friend fur five years?"

Violet, the avenger, started back, and her tearful face grew white.

"Do you know?—thet's jest what I said."

"I have doubted!" she cried. "Shut up in these great woods, I have believed many stories, for sometimes my brain seemed on fire. Oh! Matt—you will let me call you this for I loved to long ago—I will trust in you—I will believe you! Tell me honestly if he is whom he says he is—a friend and—and not that fiend who massacred all our friends."

"I'll show you who he is!" the ranger said. "If you will come with me you shall see for yourself, an' I needn't say a word."

"I will go!" Violet cried. "Lead where you will. I want this mystery cleared up. Oh, Matt, you haven't been kept from the path of vengeance as I have for five years."

"No! I've been a thorn in the side of the skunks of the Northwest. My leetle one, there be precious few left who rode down upon us that night when I war makin' a swing fur you in the tree."

Without more ado, Shadow-Shot seized the girl's hand and led her over the patches of moonlight and shade which he had traversed to the cavern.

No word passed between the twain until the upland woods were reached, and Violet started at beholding Nightingale Nat step from the shadow of his tree.

"It is the boy!" Shadow-Shot said to her. "You've seen him afore."

"Yes," the girl said. "I trust he isn't as bad as I've heard he is. I know he is not, for he is with you, Matt."

Her trust in the unbandsome ranger brought a smile to more than one face beneath the tree, and the boy turned to Shadow-Shot.

"You are just in time!" he said. "They are coming even now."

"Thet's so!"

A sound that now fell distinctly upon the ears of all announced the approach of a body of night-riders, and the ranger grasped Violet's arm as she looked inquiringly into his face.

"Thar's a long streak of moonlight," he said, pointing ahead. "Some fellars are goin' to ride along it presently. Keep your eyes fastened on it, my little one, an' see what you kin see!"

The avenger seemed to comprehend beforehand the sight in store for her eyes. She fixed her gaze on the lighted spot.

The sounds of hoofs grew more distinct, and voices of men—good English and Indian jargon—were soon heard.

Suddenly the head of the cavalcade debouched into the moonshine and reins were drawn.

"It are the Vultures!" whispered Shadow-Shot, at the girl's ear.

No need of that. Her white face, flashing eyes, and compressed lips, told that she had recognized the terrors of the woods!

But there was one figure which above all others commanded her attention. She saw the gay hat, the brigandish dress of Captain Dave; but under the broad brim was the face of Noel Gordon!

The sight brought a cry to Violet Collyer's lips.

"The living lie!" she exclaimed. "Here will I avenge the deeds of that one night."

Quick as a flash, she sprung beyond the reach of Shadow-Shot's arm, and at the report of her rifle, Captain Dave fell forward on his steed's neck with a heavy groan.

"I was afeard of it!" the ranger said, looking at Nat, as he seized the fair avenger. "We're in fur it now. A shot, quick! boy, an' then a run fur it."

Simultaneously the twain threw their weapons to their shoulders, and before the Vultures could

recover from the effects of the avenger's shot, two more of their number dropped dead from their saddles!

"Now!" cried Shadow Shot, seizing Violet in his arms. "Down the Devil's Path. We'll outwit the skunks yet, my little ones!"

The ranger darted for the cliff, as the recovering bandits, startled anew by his voice, poured a harmless volley among the trees.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MYSTERIOUS SLAYER.

IN order to follow the trio to the bed of the chasm, the Vultures were forced to dismount. The pathway of rocks leading to the bottom was too precipitous to admit of the descent of horses.

Without a moment's hesitation, bloodthirsty and vindictive, the outlaws poured into the defile. Several were left in the woods above to guard the horses. Indians and whites, in their eagerness to get at the wielders of the death-dealing rifles, loosened stones in great numbers, which, rolling down the dark path, fell with plashes in the stream.

The trio reached the bottom of the chasm in safety, where the rifles were hastily reloaded.

"You're convinced now, my leetle one!" Shadow Shot said, with a smile, as he turned upon Violet.

"Yes!" said the girl, a gleam of victory in her eyes. "After being kept back five years by the power of a lie, I have at last avenged my father's death."

"Thar'll be safety for trains in these parts henceforward."

"It has been a wood of death—this vast timber-land."

"Shadow-Shot, did you notice who rode beside Captain Dave?"

The questioner was Nightingale Nat.

"No, boy. I was lookin' at the chief sinner of 'em all."

"It was Captain Rough!"

The wild ranger did not start. Why should the intelligence cause surprise?

"Birds of a feather," he said. "They've taken the boy-whipper into full faith an' fellowship. I guess. Did you drop him, my leetle one?"

"No. His time had not come. He must tell everything before he dies."

"That's so. If I don't recollect this I might give the skunk a bullet some o' these times."

The foregoing conversation was quickly exchanged while the trio reloaded the rifles in a darkened place not far from the end of the path.

Their ears were constantly saluted by the sounds of the approach of the foe, who were cursing the rocks which they loosened in their descent.

"Go down the stream with the gal," Shadow-Shot said, suddenly, to the boy. "I'll jine you in a minnit."

Nat turned to Violet.

"Go, leetle one," the ranger said, seeing the fair avenger hesitate. "I want to drop another Vulture afore I leave, an' then I'll kiver the retreat."

Seizing Violet's hand, Nightingale Nat started

down the stream. The way was not rough, and the twain made rapid progress, passing soon from the ranger's sight.

Standing in the shadows with his eyes fastened on the mouth of the Devil's Path, cast in moonlight and plainly visible, the gaunt ranger awaited the foe.

He heard them still struggling down the narrow way; the rocks shot from it and lost themselves in the river, each succeeding one announcing the progress of the fiends in the cut.

At last a scarlet figure bounded over the great boulder which tried to block the mouth of the ravine, and landed full in the moonlight. Shadow-Shot saw his tuft of eagle-feathers, the fiendish face, and the banded arms.

"If this old gun doesn't miss, my bird of prey!" quoted Shadow-Shot, raising the rifle quickly to his shoulder. "An' miss it never does, by hokey!"

Quick as was his glance down the long barrel to the Sioux's breast, his finger was not quick enough for the bolt of death which leaped from a rifle overhead.

The report startled the ranger; he lowered his own rifle and looked up, blank astonishment depicted on his countenance.

The Indian lay in the big boulder, a lifeless mass of humanity.

"Flints and triggers!" ejaculated the ranger. "Who fired thet shot? It warn't the boy, fur he hasn't had time to get up thar. It's uncommon strange; but it has stopped the devils in the cut. No! they're comin' ag'in!"

Another rock shot over the boulder and splashed into the water, and several figures sprung into the moonlight.

Shadow-Shot raised his rifle again; but that mysterious marksman overhead forestalled him in the work of death, and another Vulture—this time a white man—staggered against the rocks to die.

Astounded more than ever, the ranger cast his eyes upward, but saw nothing but a puff of smoke, white and wavy, against the deep blue.

"Here! you fiends, if you don't go back to your horses, thar'll not be one of you left to report!" came a voice from the position of the slayer. "By the eternal! I'll drop another in less than a minit just to show you how it's done."

The Vultures started back with eyes staring at the rocks overhead, and faces blanched with fear.

Death seemed to be enthroned among them, for his fatal thunderbolts had been hurled amid their ranks.

"Arn't you goin'?" came the same rough voice after a minute of waiting. "I'll give you a minit to make yourselves scarce in. Not that I want to kill ye partic'larly, but I don't like to handle a weepen that hits all the time."

There was a grim sense of humor in the unseen man which made Shadow-Shot smile, and he wondered anew who the marksman was.

That last threat, coupled to the grace of one brief minute, had the desired effect; the Vultures retreated into the cut, but halted there.

"Go up!" cried the unseen. "When I say leave, I mean fur ye to git out of the reach of

this gun, an' it carries a bullet an uncommon ways. I kin shoot clean up the cut. Bless me if I can't shoot right around a tree with this old weepson. Git out! my birds!"

Up the cut scrambled the discomfited and cursing Vultures.

The man who had caused the retreat of the trio was a deadly mystery to them. The minutes that elapsed during the flight up the cut seemed burdened with death, but the mysterious slayer was merciful, and no bullet spun on its mission of doom.

The most bewildered man was our friend Shadow-Shot. The voice of the slayer was totally strange to him. It was the voice of a man uncouth and unlearned like himself, the kind of an ally for whom he had often wished.

His heart went off to the unknown, and before the Vultures had regained their horses, his gaunt figure was pushing its way up the rocks to the spot whence the voice had emanated.

Waiting for him, for Shadow-Shot's progress was made known by noises which it occasioned, a man was crouched between two ragged rocks. There was nothing in the stranger's appearance that might be startling. He was a heavy-set man with piercing gray eyes deeply set in his head, and an open face covered by a reddish beard of a fortnight's growth. His garments were good and totally unlike the half-savage garb that covered Shadow-Shot's lank figure.

All at once he poked his head over the stones and fixed his gaze on the ranger who stopped with an ejaculation of surprise.

"I heerd you comin', stranger," the dead-shot said, thrusting a hand over his breastwork. "Bless me! if you ain't the man what guv us warnin' several nights ago. Put her thar! Thar 're two Vultures down yonder. How many did you kill in the woods?"

"Three, I think."

"Three an' two ar' five, an' the feller what my bullet ran ag'in not long since makes a good half dozen. Say! I kind o' like ye; that's me, Jack Gustin, one of Captain Rough's men."

Shadow-Shot took the proffered hand and shook it warmly.

"You kin shoot like lightnin'," he said, looking into Gustin's eyes.

"I l'arnt that art in Illinoy. Used to pick wild-cats an' wolverines at night in jest sech places as this. Say, stranger, it's all up with the boys."

There was emotion and sadness in the rough voice.

"What boys?"

"The train boys! Them Vultures followed an' butchered all. Not a wagon will ever roll along the rocks of Lake Superior. I hev' jest come from the scene of massacre. The boys ar' all thar but Cap'n Rough."

"He is with the Vultures!" said Shadow-Shot.

"Jined 'em? Water will seek its level. The scamp has found his sphare at last. But whar's the boy?"

"Oh, the boy—an' the gal!" cried the ranger, suddenly recollecting the youthful couple whom he had dismissed for awhile a short time before. "Flints an' triggers! if I warn't furgettin' 'em. Come, Jack! we'll go to the leetle ones, an' try to get 'em out of these parts,"

The two men left the spot and made their way below.

As all sounds of the Vultures had died away it was evident that they had departed satisfied with the blood shed by their adversaries. But, they would not give up their quest until more lives had been taken.

Over at the foot of the cliffs the two men hurried down the stream. They were eager to reach the young fugitives; but many rods of ground were traversed without finding them.

"Whar can they be?" asked the long ranger, pausing and giving Gustin a puzzled look. "I told 'em not to go too fur. It ar' gittin' interestin', Jack. I'm kind o' feerful like!"

Gustin looked around before he attempted to reply.

He saw the moonlight on the water far down the ravine; he noticed great dark walls above him, but no signs of Nightingale Nat and Violet were seen.

"Curious!" he ejaculated.

"No! it isn't curious! I've got the two birds in my power, an' I'm goin' to throw 'em squar' down to you! Look out!"

If a thunderbolt had burst in the faces of the rangers, they would not have started back less horrified.

"Great Caesar's ghost!" cried Shadow-Shot, staring upward. "In the name of creation, who are ye?"

The question was answered at his side by Gustin.

"It is Zimri Paddock!"

Then he sprung forward.

"Hold, Zimri!" he shouted, "I am here—Jack Gustin!"

"Oh, that doesn't mend the matter, Jack," was the reply. "I'll throw the boy down first. Hold still, my little Nightingale; you won't be a minit fallin'!"

The last brutal words were distinctly heard by the horrified rangers below.

"Catch the boy if he comes!" Gustin said, quickly, to Shadow-Shot, and the next moment he sprung to the ascent of the cliff.

Shadow-Shot dropped his gun and planted himself firmly as a statue at the edge of the moonlight.

CHAPTER XII.

PADDOCK'S DESCENT.

THE scene above the bed of the stream, or, to be precise, fifty feet above Shadow Shot and his new-found ally, was quite exciting.

The causes that led to it were simply these:

Obedient to the ranger's command, as we have seen, Nightingale Nat and Violet left him to guard the retreat, and hastened along the stony bank of the forest river.

Not far away an individual who stood alone had been startled by the sudden shot fired with fatal effect by the girl-avenger upon recognizing Noel Gordon in his true *role* at the head of the Vultures. Following that shot, came the other reports before which two more outlaws bit the dust.

They startled him beyond description, and he was about to leave his station for the purpose of inquiring into the reports, when voices rapidly approaching saluted his ears.

He changed his purpose, and, with a pistol in each hand, threw his gaze up the stream.

Straight toward him came the youthful twain.

"The Nightingale, by my life!" he exclaimed, as his eyes dilated with astonishment. "Now, my singin'-bird, I'll clip your feathers, an' those, too, of the pretty mate you've found somewhar in these woods. She's the creature who untied you from the tree. Well, it will be her last untiein'—her very last!"

All at once the young fugitives were startled to see a figure spring from the shadows of the ragged rocks and plant itself firmly in their path.

"Not a trigger, my birds!" said the man coarsely. "I kin shoot with both hands at once. Zim Paddock used to do thet fur amusement, you know, boy."

Nat recognized his old tormentor at a glance.

Shadow-Shot was up the stream facing the Vultures.

Where was help to come from? They were in the hands of the uncultured rough—Captain Rough's tool.

At his command, which was accompanied by a terrible threat, the twain threw their weapons aside. His eyes told that disobedience might be followed by death.

"Now, for'ard march!"

That command was also obeyed.

At a wide path to the cliffs above—a path whose sides and bottom were brilliantly revealed by the light of the moon—the villain halted with his prisoners, and they began to climb up.

Close behind, with his pistols, moved Zimri Paddock, the very devilishness of savage glee in his evil eye. Biting his lip and biding his time, the boy of the train toiled slowly up the path with the girl's hand in his.

They heard the shots of the mysterious slayer which played such deadly havoc with the pursuing outlaws, and thought that they came from Shadow-Shot's rifle.

Zimri Paddock heard them, too, and was puzzled.

At the top of the cliff he halted and listened.

The approach of the two rangers was soon heard, and from that spot he startled them with the terrible threat recorded at the close of the foregoing chapter.

Violet, unarmed, stood a short distance from the brute, who held Nat in a grip of iron. She was powerless to help, and, of himself, the boy could do nothing in the hands of a strong man, whose passion was aided by his prodigious strength.

"No! you'll not be long fallin'!" he repeated, looking into the youth's face, and then he called aloud:

"Stan' from under down thar, Jack Gustin!"

The man knew that his position in the shadows concealed his person from the eyes of the twain below.

But Gustin did not reply; he was half-way up the rocks, still climbing on, knife in mouth, and rifle slung across his back by means of a buckskin strap.

"What hev ye to say, my Nightingale?" said Paddock, suddenly.

"Nothing, Zimri; you will pay for this night's work. That's all!"

"Well, it warn't much, boy," was the rejoinder, followed by a coarse laugh.

He stepped back with the heartless cachinnation on his lips.

"Now, my singer!" he hissed.

By main strength he forced the boy from the ground. Over the outlaw's head he went.

Another moment, with his victim, Zimri Paddock was at the very brink of the precipice.

A cry which, for the triumph of fiendishness it contained, was enough to strike a chill to the bravest heart, pealed from his throat.

It made Shadow-Shot brace himself. He knew what was coming.

While yet that cry echoed in forest and over stream, another different, but piercing all the same, was heard, and a human body went hurtling over the cliff!

Shadow-Shot saw the object shoot from the shadow, and like a great shell come spinning toward him through the moonlight.

For an instant he prepared to catch it in his strong embrace; but with a cry of horror he leaped aside, and the mass fell heavily on the jagged rocks at his feet!

"I thought it war too big a body fur the lee-tle one!" he said, approaching the quivering mass which preserved the outlines of the human form.

He bent over the man, and saw the pallid, death-like face of Zimri Paddock.

"Somebody turned the tables up thar, eh?" said Shadow-Shot, seeing the wandering eyes become fixed upon him. "You shouldn't hev waited till Jack got up."

"Jack?" muttered Paddock, trying to rise. "It warn't Jack. That girl—the Nightingale's mate—hit me with somethin', an' hyar I am."

"An' hyar you're likely to stay!" the ranger said. "It takes no doctor to see that you're goin' to give in. Say, what do you know about the little ones?"

"Nothin'!" and the lips closed more than half triumphantly behind the word.

"Nothin', Paddock? Sart'in?"

"If I did, I wouldn't tell you, an' let you reap the benefit of it," was the malignant reply.

Shadow-Shot bit his lip.

Paddock saw the discomfiture and smiled.

Then his head went to one side spasmodically, and with his eyes fastened on the ranger, Zimri Paddock's life went out in the little chasm.

"Wouldn't tell if you knowed, eh?" exclaimed Shadow-Shot. "Well, I kinder think you knowed. It did you a heap of good to be stubborn. I'll wring it from the heart of Captain Rough one of these days."

Springing over the body of the man whose career of crime had so tragically terminated, the ranger began to ascend the cliff, and soon stood before the rejoicing trio there.

"Is he dead?" asked a voice at his side.

"Dead?—dead as a Labrador herrin'!" answered Shadow-Shot, a queer twinkle in his eye as he looked into the face of the fair questioner.

Violet stood before the ranger, a long, stout stick in her white hands—the stick which she had hurriedly snatched from the ground and

with it dealt Zimri Paddock the blow which had caused him to lose his gripe on Nightingale Nat and fall headlong over the precipice!

"He went over my head like a deer," said Jack Gustin. "I thought it war the boy till I saw him gettin' on his feet hyar. If he'd held the leetle chap a minit longer he'd felt old Jack's hand on his breathin' apparatus!"

"What! Jack Gustin?" cried Nightingale Nat, springing to the speaker whose voice he now recognized. "I thought you were with the train."

"Not much, thank 'e, boy. I'm Jack Gustin, big as life. Me an' Shadder-Shot ar' goin' to stick to ye through thick and thin. We mean business, too."

A look of gratitude filled the boy's eyes; he placed his hand in the woodman's rough palm.

"I can ask no more, Jack. You two stand by me, for I'm going to stand by this young lady."

"Young lady!" exclaimed Shadow-Shot, following his exclamation with a prolonged whistle. "It's gittin' interestin' mighty soon. Young lady, forsooth! She's only a gal; but you'll make a lady of her, my little one."

Nightingale Nat blushed and cast down his lustrous eyes.

CHAPTER XIII.

DIAMOND CUTS DIAMOND.

WE will now return to the Vultures whom we left retreating up the path in the rocks before the death-dealing rifle of Jack Gustin.

Their hearts were full of revenge, and they panted to return and glut that passion which had ruled their evil natures so long; but the stern voice of the slayer, whose work lay at the foot of the cut, told them that such a policy at that time was hazardous and full of death.

So they smothered their rage as best they could, and ascended to the woodland above.

They were met there by the horses which had been left in the cave by several of their number, and were not long in springing to saddle.

The outlaws slain by Shadow-Shot and the boy lay in the moonlight with the ghastly hue of death on their upturned faces.

Where was Captain Dave?

Seated on a beautiful iron gray whose curved neck was the synonym of strength and pride, the forest Apollo met the gaze of his returning band. His jaunty hat had fallen to the ground, and one of the corks of the iron feet pressed the broad rim into the earth. His chin lay on his breast, and below the white face a little stream of blood trickled across his neck. He was not dead, for he started at the voices of his men returning from the unsuccessful and deadly pursuit, and looked with a glance of anxious inquiry into the face of the man whose arm seemed to stay his body in the saddle.

That man was Captain Rough.

"The boys are back!" Rough said, answering the glance.

"Call them up," was the response, in a hoarse whisper.

In a brief time the White Vulture was surrounded by his angry, discomfited men.

His eye wandered among the crowd, and he seemed to be mentally counting their numbers,

"We left two over there!" said the leader of the pursuit, pointing to the chasm.

"And two are here?"

"Yes."

"That's four to-night!"

There was no reply; the outlaws glanced from their wounded leader to the two corpses on the ground.

"Who did the shooting over there?" Captain Dave asked.

"Nobody knows. It warn't Shadow-Shot's weepson, fur we know the crack. The first shot took Little Crowfoot, an' then Lane Nick got the leaden pill. The voice what we heerd was totally strange. It war uncommon shootin', Cap'n Dave!"

"And you ran?"

There was scorn and sarcasm in the husky voice.

"Yes. It war death to turn back, an' we wanted to fight around you if you lived, an' to avenge you if we found you dead."

"Not dead yet!" and the speaker tottered in the saddle as he spoke, as if to tell his followers that the grim monster even then was shaking him. "I'm worth twenty dead men. Oh! we'll have vengeance for this!"

Vengeance?

The profane responses that followed his words told the feelings of his men.

"I don't know where the bullet is. I feel as if it went clear through me. He shot a little too low! Go down to the camp by the ford. If I am able I will join you there to-morrow."

The rough-riders hesitated; they did not want to desert their leader.

"Go!" was the command, accompanied by the look and lifting of the finger that commanded respect and obedience. "Boys, I am Captain Dave yet."

One by one the Vultures began to turn their horses' heads.

The two captains were left alone.

"They would follow me to the brazen gates of Hades!" the Apollo said, his eyes lighting up with pride as he looked at Captain Rough. "One of these days perhaps I may lead them thither. Have I lost much blood?"

"A great amount," was the reply. "We are alone now."

"Then move straight ahead. Your arm need not steady me longer."

Rough laughed.

"If I released you you would not sit in the saddle half a minute."

The outlaw gritted his teeth.

"Maybe so," he said. "But the scoundrel's bullet did not finish me. I will not die. I swear by the stars of heaven that I am not going under this time! There isn't power enough anywhere to kill me before I have carried out my plans in these woods."

"Your plans?" asked Rough, inquisitively.

"My plans! Captain, we've been *friends* a long time; before we met in these woods, we knew one another. You brought the boy here for a purpose. It is known to me. I'm not going to interfere, captain. Your business is not mine, mine not yours. You are going to conduct me to a certain place; you will see somebody there. Will you keep my secret?"

Captain Rough started. So the forest outlaw possessed a secret.

"Did I ever blow on you, Dave?" he asked, appearing offended at the question.

"No. I've got a girl in these parts—one of the prettiest creatures that ever inhabited them. Why, I've known her for five years, and she does not dream that I am Captain Dave, of the Vultures."

A girl in love with the leader of the outlaws? The thought was ludicrous to the brutal Rough.

"Where did you get her?" he asked, anxiously.

"Never mind that!" was the reply. "I want you to see her."

There was a strange light in the train-master's eyes. It was well that he turned them away, for had the Apollo caught their glance, he would have repented of his words.

"And I am eager to see this beauty of yours, Dave."

"Straight ahead, then. I will guide you."

Slowly the two rode from the spot. Rough still held his companion upright in the saddle, and again the chin sunk upon the crimsoned bosom.

It would be difficult to describe the thoughts that filled the scheming brain of Captain Rough as he rode beside the Pest of the Wisconsin woods. A new revelation had broken upon him; he felt that his feet were on a path that terminated in a mine of untold wealth. He thought no longer of the copper and, perhaps, gold deposits on the shores of Lake Superior; the butchery of his train-men called up no thoughts of revenge; he forgot it entirely! His plans, deserting Nightingale Nat for the nonce, clustered about this strange girl whom the forest brigand had mentioned.

After a toilsome ride, toilsome on account of Captain Dave's wound, the two men found themselves on the bank of the forest stream, to which they had descended by means of a gradually sloping path.

The steeds were guided along the bank until the space between water and cliff would not admit of passage by the animals. So the twain were compelled to dismount and proceed on foot, which they did, Captain Rough steadying the White Vulture, whose steps were tottering.

At last the journey ended: the cave-home stood revealed in the dim light of the waning moon.

Captain Dave released himself, and tottered forward to sink upon a heap of skins with a sigh of intense relief.

"Violet?" he exclaimed.

Of course to the name there was no response.

He called again and again, elevating his voice and manifesting impatience at each call.

Captain Rough stood in the shadow, eager to see the person who bore the name.

"She isn't here, captain!" the Vulture cried, rising with a pallor of fear on his face. "I always found her here. I wonder if she was with that infernal Shadow who has followed me and my men for five years?"

Captain Rough could not reply, for he did not know.

"Well, she may come!" Captain Dave said, catching at a bubble of hope of his own blow-

ing. "We must wait. Here are pine burrs and sticks, my friend. Make a fire at the edge of the bed, and we will look at my hurt. My lungs seem full of needles just now. If the bullet went through them, maybe I'll have to look for a coffin after all."

The outlaw returned to the cot while Rough proceeded to build a fire on the floor of the cavern, and the light of a ruddy blaze soon illumined the place.

It revealed no tenant besides the two men, and Captain Dave's eyes filled with blank disappointment as they returned to his bloody breast after the search for Violet.

He bore the unsurgical examination with that fortitude which the occasion demanded. Heedless, as it were, of the value of life, Captain Rough probed the wound below the right shoulder-blade, and smiled grimly to himself as he noticed that it promised to prove fatal to the Apollo.

But Captain Dave was the possessor of a constitution of iron, and his determination to get well might conquer death, and rob him of a victim.

"It's a bad one!" Rough said, completing the examination.

"I should suggest that it was!" was the reply in no good humor. "Ninety-nine men out of a hundred would stand a mighty poor chance of getting well after being shot as I have been, and having had a knife rummaging through their lungs looking for the ball! But I gritted my teeth and never squealed, captain!"

Rough looked away: he almost felt the flashing eyes that regarded him; the voice, so full of sarcasm, cut him to the quick.

His eyes fell upon the stone wall revealed by the fire.

Suddenly he started.

There was a name on the stone—*Violet Collyer!*

All at once he started to his feet, and stepped toward the threshold of the cave.

Greed was in his eyes. He had made a wonderful discovery.

But the orbs of Captain Dave were upon him.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

At that moment Captain Rough halted, and snatching a rifle that leaned against the wall, wheeled suddenly upon the bandit.

"I've found the very person I want to find!" he cried. "Look at that name on the wall. Violet Collyer is worth untold wealth to me. Captain Dave, you stand between me and that money. I'm going to kill you here. Your wound will not need dressing."

He was standing within twenty feet of Captain Dave, who did not quail before the muzzle of the dangerous weapon.

"Shoot and be hanged!" was the defiant response. "I know what that girl is worth to any one who takes her back to the city, and I know, too, who the boy is. Captain Rough, we've played desperate games in our lifetime; we've taken desperate chances. I knew that your discovery would come; but I had to have help to get there. You tried to kill me a minute ago, by fooling with my wound. Now you want to finish Shadow-Shot's work with the rifle. Do you think you will do it, captain?"

"What is there to hinder me?"

Captain Dave smiled.

"Did you take me for a fool?" he said. "Knowing you as I do, did you think I would hold your rifle while you tied the horses without taking the cap off? Ha! ha! Captain Rough! When diamond cuts diamond, the hardest will win. Now, sir, you are mine!"

A pistol came from beneath the covering of the couch, and with both hands, for he was weak, Captain Dave thrust it forward.

Rough touched the trigger of his rifle; there was a click, but no report!

The sound seemed the sentence of death.

"Mercy, Dave!" he cried, flinging the useless weapon against the wall of the cavern.

"Mercy!" was the heartless echo. "That is just what you were going to parcel out to me, eh, captain?"

The speaker's eyes seemed to emit sparks of fire.

Captain Rough knew that he was dealing with a fiend.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FIGHT IN THE CAVE.

WHILE the events narrated in the several foregoing chapters were transpiring, another character of our romance, and one from whom we have been separated, perhaps, too long, was listening to sounds that startled him.

It was Sharp Knife, the Crow!

It will be remembered that he followed Rafe Armstrong to the cave-home where he, at Captain Dave's bidding, struck the deserter his death-blow, and that he in turn fell before Violet's rifle.

The girl did not go to note the effects of her shot; she turned to the mortally-wounded man to hear him reiterate the charges concerning the true identity of the man who called himself Noel Gordon.

If she had visited the place where the Indian fell she might have discovered that the Crow was not dead, simply stunned by the ball, which carried away part of the scalp above the ear.

Upon recovering, Sharp Knife made himself as scarce as possible, and in a short time he was quite a distance from the cave-home. The thought of returning to his master, the outlaw, without revenging himself on the fair girl whose rifle had so nearly put an end to his existence, was not a tenant of his brain. He believed that he had slain the deserter, and an Indian, who assassin-like, gets a fair blow at an adversary, does not need to wonder if that blow was fatal.

Rafe Armstrong was as good as dead. Sharp Knife believed this.

Then the presence of such a being as Violet Collyer in the forest was a mystery to the Indian. He was not so obtuse that he could not connect Captain Dave's frequent absences from the band with her, and the cave-home. Sharp Knife was not a member of the Vultures at the massacre of Collyer's train, therefore he knew nothing about the identity of the avenger. He spoke in different English, and the conversation which had passed between Armstrong and the girl—every word of which he heard—was not understood enough to enlighten him.

Not long after his flight from the cavern, he

saw the Vultures ride through the forest; but he did not join them. He was on a trail which personally concerned himself.

We have said that the revengeful Crow was listening to startling sounds. So, indeed, he was.

He was letting his scarlet body down over the rocks that rose above the cave when he heard the sound of voices. Sharp Knife stopped and listened attentively.

A familiar light beamed in his eye when he recognized Captain Dave's voice.

The outlaw was in the cave that sheltered the white girl; but he was not alone.

It was the voice of Captain Rough that mystified the Indian, for he heard it for the first time.

As he had been dismissed upon the errand of assassination, he had not taken a part in the attack on the train, and therefore he had not become acquainted with the captain's speech.

After awhile, as the words grew high, indicating a season of choler, the Indian resumed his crawl, lizard-like, and approached the cave. With the glittering knife in his teeth he continued to near the top of the natural door, and at length, eager to see the occupants of the cave, leaned over for that purpose.

His evil eye saw Captain Dave sitting bolt-upright on the cot, pointing the pistol at Captain Rough.

Violet, the girl, was not to be seen.

Such scenes excited Sharp Knife; his dark eyes flashed.

He heard Rough appeal for mercy, when he found the tables suddenly turned on him, and then the laugh of derision which greeted it.

He saw the blood-besmeared face of his reckless, leader, and fastened his wicked eye upon Rough whom he believed the perpetrator of the deed.

To see an enemy of Captain Dave meant to Sharp Knife an attack, and with a half tigerish cry he executed a dexterous somerset which landed him upon the unsuspecting man.

Rough uttered a startling cry, and staggered back; but the savage with the nature of the wildcat uppermost in his heart, kept his hold and bore him back.

"Sharp Knife!" exclaimed Captain Dave with surprise; but the Crow did not hear; he wanted to finish the man whom he believed had wounded his master.

Rough was a man of splendid physique, and, as a wrestler, a match for any naked Indian in the then wilds of the "Badger State." He succeeded by a sudden display of dexterity in grappling with the brave, and putting himself on an equal footing with the adversary.

He twisted the assassin's wrist until with a cry of pain the red-skin was obliged to relinquish the knife which fell to the ground. Vainly trying to trip each other, the two athletes struggled for the mastery in the presence of the single spectator who watched the combat, unable to rise to lend a helping hand to the red-skin.

But Captain Dave watched for a chance when he might suddenly raise the pistol and render victory certain for the Crow.

It was a struggle between two wrestlers, well

matched and fresh. They fought for no belt; but for the life of each other.

At last Captain Rough, by a *coup de maitre*, which Sharp Knife had thwarted several times, succeeded in grasping the scarlet trachea. His great hand closed like an instrument of inquisitorial torture on the red-skin, and he saw the flashing eyes grow deathly and roll wildly in their sockets.

Captain Dave observed the advantage and greeted it with a curse.

But he could not help his tool, for Captain Rough stubbornly kept his body between him and the cot.

Rough was in his element—the power to display his brutality.

A child could have released Sharp Knife's hold on his antagonist, as the death gripe tightened. His hands fell limp and powerless at his side; he was gasping like a dying man.

"You thought you were too much for Captain Rough, eh?" cried the victor, looking into the face becoming hideous at the end of his arms. "By George! I guess you've grappled your last man, Mr. Sharp Knife! Why, I used to knock men bigger than you clean over the ropes at Aug's. I'm no boy. I haven't forgotten science, if I am in the woods of Wisconsin!"

Of course the Indian could not reply.

"Look out, Captain Dave!" he suddenly cried, glancing over the Indian's shoulder at the white-faced man who in his inability to rise was actually frothing at the mouth. "Here comes a thunderbolt what I hope will crush your cursed life out."

All at once Captain Rough stepped back, dragging Sharp Knife after him by main force, and then gathering all his prodigious strength, he threw the limp body straight at the White Vulture.

It is true that two feeble hands were lifted to stay the singular bolt of war; but as well might they have been kept down.

The bolt went straight to the target!

Sharp Knife fell heavily upon the Apollo of the forest, crushing him back upon the cot with the ease of a five-ton weight, and there both lay like dead men, silent and motionless.

"It didn't take much to crush out what little life was left in you, Captain Dave!" the train commander said, with brutish triumph. "I guess I can hunt the girl up now without your meddlesome interference. There's some good stuff in you, Captain Dave; but a man couldn't always trust you out of his sight. The boy! Oh, I'll give him a bullet—but the girl—she's worth fifty thousand dollars to me, or to any man who knows what I do."

Without haste, Rough proceeded to arm himself with Captain Dave's rifle and a plentiful supply of ammunition.

"It was a lucky escape!" he said, self-congratulatorily. "Not long ago somebody's shot saved me from the Vultures, and led them in pursuit of him just when I expected to see them ride down upon me. It's ominous! It means that I bear a charmed life—that I'm going to get out of these woods with a bigger pile in prospect than I had when I entered them. Ruffian Rough, you're in luck! plenty of money and the position of a nabob among the boys

again awaits you! If I meet the Vultures, I can tell them that I left the captain comfortable. He said that they knew nothing about the cave. But I will not meet them. They have gone to the camp at the ford, and I have no business there at present."

He looked again at the startling heap of humanity that lay on the cot, and smiled.

"They'll keep the ghosts away!" he murmured, as he darted from the cavern.

His feet sounded for a time on the gravelly shore, and after awhile a man mounted on a fine horse ascended slowly to the forest above.

Captain Rough was at large again, with murder and avarice filling his heart and urging him on.

"Plenty of money and the position of nabob among the boys again!" he muttered, as he rode along.

We shall see, Captain Rough. It is in wild life especially that *chateaux en Espagne* suddenly totter and fall a mass of ruins!

He did not note the movement of life that manifested itself in the cave-home.

He was far away and did not dream of it.

Feeble arms, but determined ones, rolled Sharp Knife to the edge of the cot of skins, and the flashing of Captain Dave's eyes became apparent once more. They glanced wildly around the apartment, and gleamed with satisfaction when the ruffian's absence was noticed.

"Let me git up!" said a voice, which was more than half a groan. "By the fires of Tophet! I will git up! I am not dead!"

As if to prove that he was not a corpse, the speaker regained his feet. He was a horrible-looking specimen of humanity! Those parts of his body not besmeared with blood, were white and ghastly.

He tottered as he attempted to stand.

"I swear that I will not die!" he cried, blasphemously. "Not until I have paid Captain Rough for his devilment will I yield to the monster death. He shall not make the thousands out of the girl! I'll kill her first. I'm at war with everybody in these woods, and I'll fight to the death, and die on my foes. But I will not die now! I'm going to live to carry out every plan I have formed. Oh! if I hadn't this rascally ball in my lungs!"

He could speak no more for his limbs refused to support his body longer, and with the last word, prolonged into a cry of pain, as if occasioned by an arrow in his vitals, he fell back heavily upon the skins.

But he was not dead!

There was death in the hand that closed on the covering of the cot.

The Apollo was destined to conquer the grim monster in the little cave!

CHAPTER XV.

NAT SINGS AGAIN.

"Who told you that I sing sometimes?"

Nightingale Nat looked into the eyes of the girl who stood at his side.

"You have forgotten then that I heard you?" was the answer.

The boy was nonplused.

"Pardon me," he murmured, blushing. "I have forgotten."

"It was upon that night when you were bound to the tree. Captain Dave was guided to your side by the song, and so was I."

"Ah, yes!" the boy laughed.

"You will sing for me now? Our friends are not near enough to chide you, and I am sure that the foe is far away. Besides, you need not pitch your voice in a high key."

The gentle look of pleading that accompanied the words was irresistible.

Nightingale Nat sent his glance around, but saw no one.

Five days had passed since the adventure on the cliffs. They were a goodly distance from the scene of Zimri Paddock's doom—in a secluded part of the wilds of Wisconsin. Shadow-Shot and Gustin were hunting for Captain Rough for reasons obvious to the attentive reader, and the youthful couple had promised to await their return.

Gladly would the boy of the train sing for the fair girl.

While she looked into his eyes, he lifted his voice in one of those free, wild songs, which he could sing with such simple pathos. Her cheeks glowed as he advanced, and conscious that her gaze was upon him, his face flushed, but not a note quavered. In the song the boy suddenly forgot himself, and lifting his voice to a key which he dearly loved, he sent the song far into the forest, till a thousand wonderful echoes came back from its depths.

That loud singing might be dangerous even there; but Violet forgot peril in her love for the song, and she did not interrupt it. When the boy concluded and looked into her face, she broke out in rapturous praise of the song and the singer.

"Shadow-Shot would scold me if he heard," Nat said, with a smile. "Can't you sing?"

"I would not attempt a song after such as yours!" she said, with a smile.

"I cannot sing. I picked the song up in the city."

"What city?"

"Chicago."

The girl started.

"I lived there once—I am sure I did!"

"Shadow-Shot says that you came from Chicago with your father—Captain Collyer. But why did you leave your mother—that puzzles me?"

"My mother—what do you know about her?"

"Not much."

"Nor I. Sometimes I think—no, I cannot tell you what I think. I do not recollect anything about my mother. There was a woman who called me child sometimes, but she never kissed me. I know by this that she was not my mother. Father was never happy. I never saw him smile, and I have wondered if he ever smiled. There must have been some great cloud between him and my mother. But do not let me talk about this. Will you not sing again?"

Sing again and for her?

The boy was willing to give her another song; but before he could make a selection from his repertory, the tramp of a cavalcade was heard, and he seized the rifle that leaned against a tree.

"It is the old luck!" he exclaimed, glancing at Violet. "I always sing the foe down upon me. Look!"

The girl did look, and saw, despite the gloaming which was settling down upon the forest, the band of night-riders appearing suddenly to them.

There was no escape.

The eyes of the Vultures had descried the twain.

"They will not spare!" the boy said, through clinched teeth, and there was determination in his tone. "They are the fiends who attacked our train; they fell upon your father, girl, in these very woods. I will fight them. Go back! fly quickly toward the cave. I will cover your retreat."

But Violet did not stir.

"I will not desert you!" she said, firmly. "We are friends, and as such should stand by each other."

At this juncture the Vultures of the forest suddenly drew rein, and the voice of the foremost, a great brutal-looking fellow, fell upon the ears of the twain.

"Don't fight, my birds!" he said. "We kin clip yer wings in less than no time, an' if you lift a hand, by gimminy! I'll give the word what will do it. Drop the shootin'-irons, an' we'll take charge of ye fur the cap'n!"

Violet looked at her companion as the mention of his commander fell from the outlaw's lips.

Did he mean Captain Dave?

"Aren't you goin' to give in?" he said after a moment's waiting.

The reply was the dropping of Nat's cheek upon the rifle-stock.

The Vulture saw the movement and fell forward on his steed's neck; but as quick as he was, he was too late, for with the crack of the rifle his fingers slipped from the reins and he fell to the ground at the feet of his horse.

A cry, startling in its ferocity, greeted the young ranger's death-shot, and like a missile hurled from a catapult the Vultures darted forward.

Violet sent a ball among their ranks; but it succeeded only in wounding a horse and failed to break the force of the charge.

In the twinkling of an eye, as it were, the young couple were prisoners!

They had fallen into the clutches of the band of fiends whose deeds of daring and ferocity are still told throughout the "Badger State."

"To the cap'n, now!" said the new leader of the bandits. "These birds'll make him open his eyes. Bless me! if they ain't worth ten trains. We'll get the last bar'l open for this."

The Vultures were not long in riding from the spot and their gallop took them rapidly toward the south.

The captives, separated, seated on different horses and closely guarded, had no chance to converse with each other.

"I'll never sing again!" Nightingale Nat said to himself for the twentieth time. "Songs get a fellow into trouble in these woods. I don't care particularly for myself, but that girl has got into peril on account of my singing. Rockets and fiery serpents! I wish I never learned to

sing. No! I don't either, for it does a person a powerful sight of good sometimes. I'll wait till I'm out of the woods after this."

After rapid riding for several hours, the forest pirates reached a spot illumined by several fires about which human figures were distinguishable.

The scene soon assumed the look of a camp, and the night-riders drew rein in the ruddy light.

"Whar's the cap'n?" demanded the burly leader of the raid.

"Thar!" was the reply of a white man, who pointed to a hammock swaying gently beneath the boughs of a tree.

The leader turned and advanced.

"Cap'n," he said, to the ghastly but anxious face that looked over the edge of the suspended couch, "cap'n, we must open the last bar'l to-night, fur we've brought in two important prisoners."

The eyes in the hammock flashed fire.

"Prisoners!" his voice was husky.

"Yes," and the bandit turned to a group at one of the fires.

"Bring up the birds!" he said. "Cap'n Dave wants to take a squint at the leetle ones!"

Almost instantly Nightingale Nat and Violet were led from the group, and the eyes of the man in the swinging-bed became riveted upon them.

In order to exhibit them plainly to his gaze, one of the freebooters carried a torch in the van.

Captain Dave, for this was the identity of the man in the hammock, shut his ashen lips and kept his fiery eyes fixed upon the captives.

The thrilling scenes of the past few days had told terribly on the once handsome leader of the Vultures. His cadaverous face, the deep set, blood-shot eyes, and the nervous twitching of the finely chiseled lips told of mental and bodily anguish.

Violet did not recognize him until she was at the very edge of the hammock.

"It is not a wonder that she started back with his forest name on her lips.

"I am Captain Dave," he said, looking at her. "Girl, I owe much of my present awful situation to you. I have madly loved you, girl that you are. But there is a man abroad who is hunting you. Do you know what you are worth to him?"

The fair avenger shook her head.

"Fifty thousand dollars!" was the reply. "I never wished to claim it—the reward, I mean. He never will, I am sure. I wish I had that shadow-man here, who sent a bullet into my lungs."

The eyes of the girl sparkled with the triumph of revenge.

"Shadow-Shot did not shoot you," she said. "It was my rifle that dropped you on the neck of your horse. Captain Dave, you slew my father and his people in this very wood, and for five years you lived a lie to me, and kept me from the path of vengeance. Do you believe that I had no right to shoot you when I discovered that you were the leader of the Vulture band? I would have shot you in the midst of your men if I knew that death should come to me a moment later!"

The girl talked in a firm tone, looking straight into the eyes in the hammock.

"And so it is your bullet that I carry with me!"

"It is mine!"

His bloodless hand crept over the edge of the bed.

"Darcy," he said to one of the scourges, "give me your pistol!"

The weapon, one of the old-fashioned kind, was jerked from the outlaw's belt and thrust into the chief's hand.

"What have you got to say?" he said, turning his burning gaze upon the boy. "You ran off with my horse, not long ago, I believe."

"And if it hadn't been for certain things that night, you would not be here to take the life of an innocent girl."

"Is that all?" sneered Captain Dave.

The boy stubbornly shut his lips.

"I have a mind to make you sing!" the outlaw said.

"Try it!" was the banter.

"Oh, you wouldn't, eh? I guess you'd make the woods ring if I held the pistol at your head, and commanded you to treat us to a song; but I'll not bother you."

He fingered the hammer of the pistol as he spoke.

"The same man who wants the girl wants you, but not for the same purpose," he continued, addressing the Nightingale. "I am going to see that he gets neither."

He turned upon Violet as he uttered the last word.

"I lived a lie for five years, eh?" he flashed. "Well, I lived it completely, didn't I? Your bullet is going to be the death of me. Before many days Captain Dave will not live in these woods; but in the minds of some people he will live forever. That shadow-man has left me—the only one of the twenty-three who fell upon your father's train. He must have escaped that night."

"He did?" said Violet.

"I always thought so. Captain Rough sees fifty thousand dollars in you, but he'll never touch a dollar of it, ha! ha! It hurts me to the death almost when I laugh. My hands are getting tired of this pistol."

He said no more, but raised the weapon.

There was murder in the eyes of the dying bandit.

"Hold on, thar!" cried a rough voice. "I've got a bead drawn on your head, Cap'n Dave. By the saints! you've got more lives than a cat!"

The outlaws turned toward the sound of the startling voice.

As for Captain Dave, he lowered the pistol and raised his eyes.

"It is Captain Rough!" he said, and he lowered his voice as he glared at his lieutenant.

"Darcy, you must kill that man out there!"

"I want no fooling!" came the same strong voice. "Vultures, if one of you move I'll burst your cap'n's brain-pan! Cap'n Rough has meant business all his life!"

With one accord the outlaws looked at their leader.

What would he do?

CHAPTER XVI.
IN A TIGHT PLACE.

THE man who uttered the threatening words which startled Captain Dave and his band, sat on a horse among the shadows that lay beyond the light afforded by the fire.

His cheek rested on a rifle and the polished barrel of the deadly weapon was raised to a level with the Apollo's head.

The man was Captain Rough.

His movements since his struggle with Sharp Knife, the Crow, do not possess sufficient interest to lay them before the reader. Suffice it to say, concerning them, that he had not crossed the path of the Vultures, and that he had been able to elude the eager hands of Shadow Shot and Jack Gustin.

Darcy, the lieutenant, when commanded by his chief to get behind Rough and dispatch him, was prevented from moving by the last threat. If an outlaw stirred, the life of Captain Dave, even then hanging by a slim tenure, might be snapped by the villain's rifle.

"What do you want?" asked Captain Dave, at last, looking toward the west and vainly trying to make out the exact position of the man.

"Why, the gal, of course!" was the reply.

"And the boy, too?"

"No! you may empty your pistol into his carcass."

The Apollo looked at Nat.

"What do you think of that?"

"He never liked me!" the singer said with a smile.

"We couldn't get along on the train. I wish I was out there for a few moments."

Captain Dave saw the flashing of the boy's eyes and wished as much himself.

"What if I don't give the girl up?" the White Vulture said, trying his man.

"Refuse and I'll burst your brain open!"

The Apollo bit his lips.

"Will you go with that man?" he said, turning to Violet.

She glanced at Nightingale Nat, but did not reply.

"And leave my friend here?"

"Yes."

"I will not go!"

"Hurry up!" cried Rough, growing impatient.

"I can't sit here all night. What are you going to do?"

"The girl will not go of her own accord," Captain Dave said. "One of my own men will conduct her to you."

"Well, be quick about it. My fingers are gettin' uncommon nervous on the trigger, an' they might touch the shootin'-iron off."

The forest Apollo made a sign to Darcy, who leaned forward and clutched Violet's arm.

"A change of masters, my gal," he said; and he added, in a whisper: "You may thank your stars that Cap'n Rough opened his mouth when he did."

But the girl shrunk from the outlaw, tearing her arm from his gripe and forcing her horse back.

"No! no! I will not go to that man out there and leave my young friend with Captain Dave."

"Well, how are you goin' to help yourself, my little catamount?" cried Darcy, roughly, as the rest of the band laughed audibly at his discomfiture. "If I say go, go you shall! All the powers that are cannot prevent it. Go! I say, and by the stars, my bird, go! it is!"

The lieutenant pressed forward with outstretched hand. His eyes were fastened on Violet.

"No resistin'! I've wrung necks as purty as yourn. Come! come! my dove!"

The words were lost on the forest girl, for, with the quickness of thought, she drove her horse toward the lieutenant, and tore a pistol from his belt!

The suddenness of this startling action appalled every spectator. The Indians looked on with gutturals of surprise, and oaths shot from the throats of the white outlaws.

She reached Nightingale Nat's side in the twinkling of an eye and grasped his bridle-rein.

"Stand back!" she cried, leveling the pistol at the maddened men, who looked through the eyes of wolves upon her. "Do not lift a hand. I'll drop the first one who does."

She turned quickly and spoke sharply to the horse that bore the boy. The next moment they were off.

"Great Caesar!" ejaculated the man who sat in the shadows. "I never thought the girl had such grit and judgment as that. They will not follow! Captain has fainted in the swingin'-bed. I will catch the fugitives. I'm in luck, fur I can shoot the boy, when I come up, an' have the gal all to myself."

Captain Rough lowered his rifle and gathered up the reins. He saw the outlaws flock around the hammock back into whose depths Captain Dave had fallen with a groan. He knew that their solicitude for his welfare would occupy them for some time. He resolved to follow the young fugitives.

Wheeling abruptly about he was surprised to find his own bridle-rein in the gripe of a dark figure that darted from the dense shadow of a tree. The steed, frightened by the apparition, shied to the left.

"Who are you?" Rough demanded, as his quick hand darted to a pistol.

"Shadow-Shot, at your sarvice!" was the reply. "We've been huntin' you, cap'n. You war goin' after the leetle ones, eh? That gal played a sharp trick on Cap'n Dave, didn't she? No cussin', my bird, fur I git narvous like when I hear such words, an' my finger's on the trigger now."

Rough's hand crept reluctantly from his belt. He saw himself a captive in the hands of the death-shot of the Wisconsin woods.

"Come, Jack! fetch up the horses."

From the right a man approached. He sat astride of one horse and led another.

"It's Jack Gustin—one of your men," Shadow-Shot said, glancing at the captain, into whose eyes a gleam of hope suddenly sprung.

"Jack!" he cried, putting forth his hand. "Why, I thought they killed you when they fell like wolves upon the train. Shake, old boy: we've always been friends."

With a curious smile on his face the ranger grasped his captain's hand; but the shake had not that cordiality which characterizes the meeting of bosom friends.

"You must submit to a bit o'tyin', cap'n," the gaunt hunter said, producing a piece of rope. "It is jest for security's sake. After awhile we may turn you loose an' dismiss you with our blessin'!"

Rough did not resist while Shadow-Shot secured him to the horse, and bound his arms to his side.

"Now we're off," he said, springing upon the horse which Gustin had brought up. "The leetle ones will not go far afore they stop to take their bearings. How much did you say the gal is worth, cap'n? I heerd you talkin' to yourself awhile back. How much?—fifty thousand, eh?"

Rough did not reply.

"Mute as an oyster," and the heavy hand of the speaker fell upon the captain's shoulder. "Look a here! I mean business. There isn't any law in these parts; but thar's a certain amount of justice that strikes uncommon hard. Do you want it to strike you, Cap'n Rough? I want my questions answered. Business is business. When the time comes I'll let daylight into your brain-shop if you don't answer the questions which I will ask."

The awful determination revealed in the rough voice of the speaker sent a pallor of fright across the villain's face.

"When the time comes!" repeated Shadow-Shot. "It may come afore mornin'. Prepare to open your mouth."

No other word was spoken, for the three were pushing through the forest as fast as the night would permit. The camp of the outlaws was left to the right, and its fires disappeared.

Jack Gustin's iron hand held the bridle of Captain

Rough's horse. Shadow-Shot rode a little in advance.

After several hours' riding the long ranger drew rein and turned to his associate.

"The young 'uns may hev gone to the cave!" he said. "I hear somethin' down among the rocks. Stay hyar, an' I'll go ahead an' reconnoiter."

Rough's eyes brightened as he saw Shadow-Shot move off, and leave him alone with Gustin, one of the late members of his train.

There was a minute's silence between the two men.

"Jack," said the captain, suddenly, "we've always been friends."

The ranger smiled as he turned to listen.

"There are fifty thousand dollars in these woods for us to-night. We can make it ours without much trouble. Let us be friends and make our fortunes before we go back to the city."

"Fifty thousand dollars!" ejaculated Gustin, in assumed surprise. "Whar might that mine be, cap'n?"

"Tell me first if you will go with me!" cried Rough, anxiously, but catching eagerly at hope.

"Fifty thousand isn't to be made every day. Even I could cut a swell in the city with the half of it. It wouldn't be 'Old Jack' at Burley's any more; the high bobolinks at the nest would have to 'Mr.' me."

"Certainly they would!" exclaimed the captain. "You must decide quickly, Jack. Two are enough. I'll share equally. Shadow-Shot might return and spoil our plans."

"Whar's the mine, cap'n? I'm not the feller to embark in enterprises afore I know somethin' about 'em."

Rough was chagrined; he was losing time.

"It is where the girl is," he said. "She is worth that to us."

"How?"

"I'll tell you as we ride away. Cut my bonds, Jack, an' let me get a grip on the lines. Then we'll make a dash for the fortune."

The next moment Captain Rough saw a knife flash in the starlight; his eyes replied to the glitter.

"Cut your bonds?" cried Gustin. "I'd sooner cut your throat. Whar 're the boys what you deserted a few days ago? The Vultures followed, as you knew they would, and butchered every one! D'ye think Jack Gustin a fool? Cap'n, all the friendship I ever had for you I kin put in my eye, and see as well as ever. Fifty thousand dollars! That'll be the amount of your jail-bond when we git you back to Chicago!"

The expression that covered the ruffian's face was frightening in the extreme.

From the pinnacle of hope he had been dashed into the pit of despair!

He could not look at the honest Gustin, and turning his face away, sought to hide his countenance.

"They're comin'!" said the ranger, suddenly, and Captain Rough heard the voice of Shadow-Shot in the forest.

The tall ranger soon made his appearance, accompanied by Nightingale Nat and Violet, whom he had overtaken near the cave-home, the scene of several thrilling events in our story.

"Wal, hyar we are!" cried the hunter, looking up into Rough's face. "Cap'n, ain't it kind in me to bring you the fifty-thousand-dollar gal? An' hyar's the little one, too."

The discomfited man did not reply; a dark scowl settled on his face, and he tried to look away.

"The time is hyar!" continued Shadow-Shot. "Now, Cap'n Rough, look at that boy an' tell him who he is?"

But the stubborn man sealed his lips.

There was a sharp click of a pistol-lock.

"No foolin' cap'n! I mean business!"

CHAPTER XVII.

RETRIBUTION.

SHADOW-SHOT moved nearer the captain as he uttered the last word.

Nightingale Nat, with his eyes full of wonderment, imitated his protector's example.

"Now! tell us all!" the ranger said. "Who is the boy?"

"His right name is Winfred Maxton. His father is dead—has been these thirteen years. His cousin, Geoffry Nixon, is spending the money that belongs to the boy. In his babyhood the chap was stolen an' taken from Chicago. By-an'-by the man who was raisin' him moved into the city, an' began to manufacture fireworks. Do you recollect that, boy?"

"Yes!" cried Nat, eagerly. "He is telling truth!" he said to Shadow-Shot.

"Which is just what we want. Go on!"

"Geoffry Nixon found out that the boy came back like a piece of queer. He hunted me up, but he saw British John, the fireworks-maker, first. I agreed to bring the boy into these woods and lose him. Our trip to the copper mines was a sham, for some fellows appeared to be watchin' me. I did bring the boy here, an' he lost himself!"

Captain Rough smiled faintly at the attempt at humor on his part, and ceased.

"That's all?" said Shadow-Shot, laconically.

Rough nodded.

"You didn't fracture your own character much, cap'n. Are you sure that you war only to lose the boy in these parts? Now wasn't thar somethin' said as to how you war to lose him?"

The caged man turned pale again.

"Of course Geoffry Nixon might think that a boy lost hyar might git back to Chicago, an' upset his arrangements. Now wasn't thar to be some young blood spilled?"

"Yes!" hissed Rough. "But I wasn't to do it!"

"Oh, no! You wouldn't harm a fly. Look hyar. I'm huntin' fur evidence what will stand in law. You war to do it yerself."

The guilty look of Captain Rough betrayed him.

"We'll see if you will tell the same thin's when we get Mr. Nixon into the clutches of justice. We'll face you with the fireworks-man."

"What! are you going to take me back to the city?" cried Rough.

"Of course! Don't you want to go, cap'n? Old cronies back thar; most of 'em in jail, I s'pose."

"That is not fair, after what I have said. Leave me here to die somewhere in these wilds."

"You're not needed hyar: they've got a Captain Dave—that is enough. You're wanted in Chicago—wanted badly, cap'n, at two of the courts."

The last speaker was Jack Gustin.

"Let me say a word!"

"Sart'inly, gal," said Shadow-Shot, looking at the fair speaker, whose face was aglow with anxious excitement.

"Captain Rough, you say I would be worth fifty thousand dollars to you," Violet said, fastening her eyes upon the ruffian.

"Not that much, perhaps," he answered. "Those two men will get all they can for you, depend upon that."

Shadow-Shot's eyes sparkled.

"That's a lie, cap'n!" he said. "If the gal's mother is livin' back she goes, an' Jack an' me won't charge a cent. Now, is she livin'?"

"Yes."

"My mother living!" cried Violet. "Oh, what joy I will bring to her heart before long."

The party who composed the interesting group sat on their horses at the edge of a forest, and in the light of a full moon just rising over the horizon's rim.

The expressions of their faces were clearly visible and quite various.

The eyes of Ruffian Rough moved restlessly in their sockets.

He abominated the thought of going back to the scenes of his crimes as a prisoner. In the courts his agreement with Geoffry Nixon would be made known, the story of his desertion of the train would

be told by Jack Gustin, and the doors of the State prison would be swung open to welcome him.

Not only all this, but he was losing the opportunity of delivering long-lost Violet Collyer to her mother's arms, and reaping a goodly sum of money for the act. If he was free he would not give up hope. The trails that led to the city on the lake were long and toilsome. He could follow the quartette before him, and at last, triumphing over every obstacle, carry Violet to Chicago, and pocket the money a yearning mother would give for her child.

Freedom and gold!

The thought went like an arrow through Captain Rough's avaricious heart.

All at once he threw his body forward on the horse's neck, and yelled madly to the beast.

The cry was enough to startle any animal, and, with a snort of mingled fright and pain, for the captain plunged the spurs into his flanks, he dashed away.

A cry of astonishment burst from the lips of the spectators.

"Stay thar!" yelled Shadow-Shot, as he whirled his own steed, and darted after the ruffian.

Captain Rough, bound hand and foot as he was, could not guide his horse. But he continued to apply the spurs, caring little whither he was for the present borne.

Shadow-Shot at last began to gain on the flying man. His unnatural position in the saddle told on his horse.

The animal kept in the moonlight, eschewing the darkened forest, and keeping up his speed as well as he could.

Suddenly the handsome horse stopped, and started back with a wild snort of surprise. The ranger drew rein and listened.

He heard the neighing of a horse which came from the forest not far from Captain Rough, and that ruffian's steed replied.

The captain straightened in the saddle and turned his face toward the wood to see—

A sudden flashing of rifles, and to fall forward upon his horse's mane!

"Jehosaphat!" exclaimed Shadow-Shot, half-blinded by the sudden flash. "I reckon the Vultures have paid off an old score: they'll pay another, perhaps, if I don't get back."

Brave he was he stood not upon the order of his going; but whirled and rode back toward the others, anxiously awaiting his return.

He did not see the score of forms that gathered around Captain Rough, and cut him from the saddle. Not a word of pity fell from their lips: on the contrary, he was hurled to the ground with real forest brutality.

He lay there like one dead until two men took a human body from a horse and placed it at his side.

"They look alike!" said several voices. "Jest as if they might be brothers."

Did the words cause Captain Rough to start?

With a groan he opened his eyes and saw the dead body beside him. Starting at the sight, he raised his own body on his elbow and looked down into the handsome but pallid face.

"Dead!" he cried. "We swore once that we would never recognize each other again; but you are dead, and I'm goin' to break my oath before I die. *My brother!* may God pity—"

He said no more, for death, the relentless monster, put forth his hand and Ruffian Rough fell forward upon the cold face of his brother, Captain Dave!

The Vultures, red and white, exchanged looks of surprise; but did not speak.

In the middle of the night, with the starry girdle of heaven above them, lay the forest captains—their days and nights of crime passed forever, and justice cheated at last.

But it was the tardy justice of the courts. That forest retribution, dark and stern, had overtaken them in their guilt.

One beautiful afternoon, several days after the scenes just recorded, the voice of some one singing in the wilderness of Wisconsin filled the air with melody.

The singer was a handsome boy, who rode a horse with gallant grace, and whose wealth of glossy hair was the only covering of which his head could boast. At his side rode a beautiful girl of his own age with her large lustrous eyes fixed with love and admiration upon him, while he sung with all the ardor and zest of youth.

Just ahead of the happy twain, a pair of horses bore two men who looked like backwoods rangers.

"The leetle one kin sing to his heart's content!" said one of the men, glancing over his broad shoulder. "I wouldn't stop him for the world. Sing on, my leetle chap, for you hev sung yourself into a fortune, an' a pretty wife. Jack, we'll stir the animiles when we git to Chicago!"

Long and loud did Nightingale Nat sing the song of rejoicing, for the dangers which had environed him in the forest were over, and the city of his destination was not far away.

The arrival of the little party at Chicago did create a commotion in well-known circles. A mother pressed to her heart a daughter whom a husband had dragged from her, into the forests of the Northwest, and one Geoffrey Nixon, a man of wealth, saw his ill-gotten estates fall into the hands of the resurrected heir!

Here let us end our story.

The Vultures, after the death of the forest Apollo, ceased to act as a band, and the roads that led through the wilderness became highways of travel.

Nightingale Nat, as we will call our young hero to the end, took possession of his fortune, and entering business life in earnest, added much to it. In time he led Violet to the altar, and thus in the great city of the West was happily consummated the love born in the hours of forest peril!

As for Shadow-Shot and Jack Gustin, the whirl of city life swallowed them up to the world, but our young lovers never lost sight of the courageous twain.

Their forest deeds did not pass unrewarded; but the memory of the two captains—the strange brothers—died long ago!

THE END

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